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A SON OF HAGAR

A Romance of our Time

BY HALL CAINE

'God hath heard the voice of the lad where he is'



IN THREE VOLUMES
VOL. III

London
CHATTO AND WINDUS, PICCADILLY
1887

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A SON OF HAGAR.

BOOK THE THIRD (continued).

THE DECLIVITY OF CRIME.

CHAPTER XVI.

BEFORE Gubblum Oglethorpe parted with Jabez he tried to undo the mischief he had done. ‘Give us a shak’ o’ thy daddle,’ he said, holding out his hand. But Jabez had not forgotten the similitude of the swine ring. He made no response.

‘Dang him for a fool,’ thought Gubblum. ‘He’s as daft as a besom.’ Then Gubblum remembered with what lavish generosity he had bribed the pot-boy to no purpose. ‘He cover’t a shilling dammish,’ he thought; ‘I’ll dang his silly head off.’

Jabez put down the candle and backed out of the room, his eyes fixed on the pedlar with a ghostly stare.

'You needn't boggle at me. I'll none hurt ye,' said Gubblum. Jabez pulled the door after him.

'His head's no'but a lump of puddin' and a daub o' pancake,' thought Gubblum.

Then the pedlar sat on the bed and began to wonder what possible reason there might be for the lad's sudden change of temper. He sat long, and many crude notions trotted through his brain. At last he recalled the fact that he had said something about Jabez's snout carrying a swine ring. That was the rub, sure enough. 'I mak no doobt he thowt it was a by-wipe,' thought Gubblum.

Just as the pedlar had arrived at this sapient conclusion he heard heavy footsteps ascending and descending the ladder that stood in the passage outside. Gubblum understood the sounds to mean that the inn was so full of visitors that some of them

had to be lodged even in the loft. ‘Ey, I shouldn’t wonder but this is a bonny paying consarn,’ he thought.

He undressed, got into bed, and blew out his light. He lay awhile waiting for sleep, and thinking of the failure of his plummets to sound the depths of Jabez. Then he remembered with vexation that the lad had even laughed at him in spite of the ‘shilling dammish.’

‘Shaf, it was no’but his guts crowkin’,’ thought Gubblum, and he rolled over, face to the wall, and began to pay nasal tribute to sleep.

From the slowly tightening grip of unconsciousness, Gubblum was aroused to sudden wakefulness. There was a noise as of heavy shuffling feet outside his door. The pedlar raised himself and listened.

‘Too dark in this corner,’ said a voice.
‘Get a light.’

Gubblum crept out of bed, held his head to the door, and listened.

There were retreating steps. Then the man who had spoken before spoke again.

‘Quick, there ! we must catch the train at 11·15.’

The voice pealed in Gubblum’s memory. He knew it. It was the voice of the last man he should have looked for in this house—Hugh Ritson.

Presently the footsteps approached, and thin fingers of light shot over Gubblum’s head into his dark room. He looked up at the door. Three small round holes had been pierced into the stiles for ventilation.

‘Put the candle on the floor and take the feet—I’ll go up first,’ said the same voice.

Gubblum raised himself on tiptoe and tried to peer through the perforations. He was too small a man to see through. There was a chair by the side of his bed, and his extinguished candle stood on it. He removed the candlestick, lifted the chair cautiously, placed it back to the door, and mounted it. Then he saw all.

There were two men, and he knew both—the brothers Ritson. Ah ! had he not said that Paul Ritson kept this inn ? ‘I’ll shut up the whole boilin’ of ’em next time,’

thought the pedlar. Wait ! what were they ‘lugging into the pigeon loft’?

‘Easy—damme, but the fence is a weight.’

It was the hoarse voice of the other man. The candle was behind him and on the floor. It cast its light on his back. ‘If I could no’but get a blink frae the cannel I’d see what’s atween them,’ thought Gubblum.

The men with their burden were now at the top of the ladder.

‘Twist about, and go in sideways,’ muttered the voice first heard.

The man below twisted. This movement brought the full light of the candle on to the faces of all three.

‘Lord A’mighty, whatever’s this?’ Gubblum thought.

The burden was a man’s body. But it was the face that startled the pedlar—the face of Paul Ritson.

Gubblum’s eyes passed over the group in one quick glance. He saw two Paul Ritsons there, and one of them lay as still as the dead.

A minute more of awful tension, and the

door of the loft above was slammed and shut; the heavy feet of the two men descended the ladder quickly, and went down the stairs into the bar.

Gubblum listened as if with every sense. He knew that the outer door to the road had opened and closed. He heard footsteps dying away in the distance without. All was silent within the house.

Two men hastening in the night to the Hendon railway-station paused at that turn of the road which leads to the police offices and gaol.

‘ You go on, and take care of yourself— I’ll follow in five minutes,’ said one.

‘ You ain’t going to give a man away?’ said the other.

There was only a contemptuous snort for answer. The first speaker had turned on his heel. When he reached the police offices, he rang the bell. The door was answered by a sergeant in plain clothes. ‘ I’ve found your man for you,’ said Hugh Ritson.

‘Where, sir?’

‘At the Hawk and Heron.’

‘Who is he?’

‘Paul Drayton. You’ll find him lying drunk in the garret at the west end of the gable. Lose not an hour. Go at once.’

‘Is the gentleman who struggled with him still staying there—Mr. Paul Ritson?’

‘No, he goes back home to-night.’

‘What’s his address in the country?’

‘The Ghyll, Newlands, Cumberland.’

‘And yours, sir?’

‘I am his brother, Hugh Ritson, and my address is the same.’

‘We’ll go this instant.’

‘Take your piece of frieze with you and see if it fits. It was by the torn ulster that I recognised your man. Good-night.’

CHAPTER XVII.

As soon as the noise of the retiring steps had died away on Gubblum's ear, he dressed himself partially, opened the door of his bedroom cautiously, and stepped into the passage. He was still in the dark, and, groping with one hand, he felt for the ladder by which the two men had carried their burden to the loft above. He had grasped the lowest rungs of it, and was already some steps up, when he heard a singular noise. It was something between the cry of a child and the deep moan of a sick man. Did it come from the loft? Gubblum held his head in that direction and listened. No ; the sound was from the other end of the passage. Now it was gone, and all was quiet. What a strange house was this!

‘Can’t see a styme,’ thought Gubblum.
‘I’ll away for the cannel.’

Back in his bedroom he struck a match, and then stepped afresh into the passage, guarding the newly-lighted candle with the palm of his hand. Then there came a shrill cry. It seemed to be before him, above him, behind him, everywhere about him. Gubblum’s knees gave way, but the stubborn bit of heart in him was not to be shaken. ‘A rayder queerly sort of a house,’ he thought; and at that instant there were heavy lunges at a door at the farther end of the passage, and a cry of ‘Help. help!’

Gubblum darted in the direction of the voice.

‘Let me out!’ cried the voice from within.

Gubblum tried the door. It was locked.

‘Help, help!’ came again.

‘In a sniffter; rest ye a bit.’ shouted Gubblum, and putting the light on the floor, he planted his shoulder against the door and one foot against the opposite wall.

‘Help, help! let me out! quick, quick!’ came once more from within.

‘See a skrummidge,’ shouted Gubblum, panting for breath.

Then the lock gave way, and the door flew open. In the mist of the bad light, Gubblum saw nothing at first. Then a woman with wild eyes and a face of anguish came out on him from the dark room. It was Mercy Fisher.

When they recognised each other there was a moment of silence. But it was only a moment, and that moment was too precious to be lost. In a flood of tears the girl told what had happened.

Gubblum understood no more than that villainy had been at work. Mercy saw nothing but that she had been deceived and had been herself the instrument of deception. This was enough.

‘The raggabrush ! I’d like to rozzle their backs with an ash stick,’ said Gubblum.

‘Oh, where have they taken him—where, where?’ cried Mercy, wringing her hands.

‘Don’t put on wi’ thee—I know,’ said Gubblum. ‘I questit them up the stairs.

Come along wi' me, lass, and don't slobber and yowl like a barn.'

Gubblum whipped up his candle and hurried along the passage and up the ladder like a monkey, Mercy following at his heels.

' Belike they've locked this door forby,' he said.

But no, the key was in the lock. Gubblum turned it, and pushed it open. Then he peered into the garret, holding the candle above his head. When the light penetrated the darkness, they saw a man's figure outstretched on a mattress that lay on the bare floor of the empty room. They ran up to it, and raised the head. ' It's his fadder's son, I'll uphod thee,' said Gubblum. ' And yon riff-raff, his spitten picter, is no'but some wastrel merry-begot.'

Mercy was down on her knees beside the insensible man, chafing his hands. There was a tremulous movement of the eyelids.

' Sista, he's coming tul't. Slip away for watter, lass,' said Gubblum.

Mercy was gone and back in an instant.

‘Let a be, let a be—he’ll come round in a crack. Rub his forehead—stir thy hand, lass—pour the watter—there, that’s enough—plenty o’ butter wad sto a dog. Sista, he’s coming tul’t fast.’

Paul Ritson had opened his eyes.

‘Slip away for mair watter, lass—there, that’s summat like—rest ye, my lad—a drink?—ey, a sup o’ watter.’

Paul looked round him. His filmy eyes were full of questions. But at first his tongue would not speak. He looked up at the bare skylight and around at the bleached walls, and then back into the face of the pedlar. He noticed Mercy and smiled.

‘Where are we, my girl?’ he said faintly.

‘This is the Hawk and Heron,’ she answered.

‘How do I come to be here?’ he asked.

Mercy covered her face, and sobbed. ‘I brought you,’ she said at length.

Paul looked at her a moment with bewildered eyes. Then the tide of memory flowed back upon his mind.

'I remember,' he said quietly; 'I was feeling dizzy—hadn't slept two nights—not even been in bed—walked the streets the long hours through.'

Everything had rushed over him in a moment, and he closed his eyes with a deep groan. At his feet Mercy buried her face and sobbed aloud.

Paul drew himself feebly up on his elbow. 'Where is Parson Christian?' he asked, and gazed around with a faint smile.

The girl's anguish overflowed.

'That was a lie I told you,' she sobbed.

The smile fled away.

'A lie! Why a lie?'

He was struggling with a dazed sense.

'I told you that Parson Christian was here and wanted you. He is not here.'

And Mercy's weeping seemed to choke her.

'My good girl, and why?'

'They brought you to this room and left you, and now they are gone.'

'They! Who?'

'Your brother Hugh and Mr. Drayton.'

Paul looked deadly sick at heart.

‘Who is this Drayton?’

‘The spitten picter of yourself, my lad,’ said Gubblum; ‘the man I telt ye of lang ago—him as keeps this house.’

Paul’s eyes wandered vacantly. His nervous fingers twitched at the ulster that he wore.

‘What’s this?’ he said, and glanced down at his altered dress.

‘When you were insensible they stripped you of your clothes and put others on you,’ said Mercy.

‘Whose clothes are these?’

‘Mr. Drayton’s.’

Paul Ritson rose to his feet.

‘Where are the men?’ he said in a husky voice.

‘Gone.’

‘Where?’

‘To the station—that was all I heard.’

Paul gazed about with hazy eyes. Mercy flung herself at his feet and wept bitterly.

‘Forgive me, oh, forgive me!’

He looked down at her with a confused expression. His brain was benumbed. He drew one arm across his face as though struggling to recover some lost link of memory.

‘Why, my good lass, what’s this?’ he said, and then smiled faintly and made an attempt to raise her up.

‘Who is at the convent at Westminster?’ she asked.

Then all his manner changed.

‘Why?—what of that?’ he said.

‘Mrs. Drayton was sent there in a cab to tell Mrs. Ritson to be at St. Pancras Station at midnight, to meet her husband and return to Cumberland.’

The face that had been livid became suddenly old and ghastly. There was an awful silence.

‘Is this the truth?’ he asked.

‘Yes, yes,’ cried the girl.

Paul’s face was now awful to see. His features were convulsed with agony, his eyes were bloodshot. The palms of his hands became damp.

‘I think I see it all now—I think I understand,’ he faltered.

‘Forgive me!’ cried the girl.

He seemed hardly to see her.

‘I have been left in this room insensible, and the impostor who resembles me—where is he now? What cruel work is afoot?’

He struggled with the sickness that was mastering him. His brain reeled. He staggered and leaned against the wall.

‘Rest ye a bit, my lad,’ said Gubblum.
‘You’ll be gitten staunch agen soon.’

He recovered his feet. He thrust the pedlar aside. His face was charged with new anger.

‘And the wicked woman who trapped me to this house is here,’ he said in a voice thick with wrath.

‘Forgive me, forgive me!’ wept the girl at his feet.

He took her firmly by the shoulders, raised her to her knees, and turned her face upwards until her eyes met his.

‘Let me look at her,’ he said hoarsely.
‘Who would have believed it? And I

thought her the victim of a scoundrel, and swore in my heart to see her righted even yet!'

'Forgive me, forgive me!' cried the girl.

'Woman, woman, what had I done to you—what, what? Had you no pity, none for a broken-hearted man?'

The girl's sobs alone made answer.

'Cruel, cruel! The monsters, where are they? Where is my wife? And I am here stricken in limb and brain! Idiot that I was to leave her for an instant! Idiot, idiot, to fall into these cruel toils!'

'Forgive me, forgive me!' the girl cried again.

In his rage he took her by the throat. A fearful purpose was written in his face.

'And this is the woman who bowed down the head of her old father nigh to the grave,' he said bitterly, and flung her from him.

Then he staggered back. His little strength had left him. There was silence. Only the girl's weeping could be heard.

The next instant, strangely calm, without

a tear in his sad eyes, he stepped to her side and raised her to her feet.

‘I was wrong,’ he said, ‘surely I was wrong. You could not lie to me like that—and know it. No, no, no ! You did not know it was a lie. Tell me you did not know it.’

‘They told me what I told you,’ said the girl.

‘And I blamed you for it all, poor girl—poor deluded girl.’

‘Then you forgive me ?’ she said, lifting her eyes timidly.

‘Forgive you ?—ask God to forgive you, girl—don’t ask me—I am only a man, and you have wrecked my life.’

There was a foot on the ladder, and Jabez, the boy, stepped up, a candle in his hand. He had been waiting for the landlady, when he heard voices overhead.

‘The varra man,’ shouted Gubblum. ‘Didsta see owt of thy master downstairs?’ Jabez grinned, and glanced up at Paul Ritson.

‘Hark ye, laal man, didsta see two men

leaving the house a matter of fifteen minutes ago?’

‘Belike I did,’ said Jabez. ‘And to be sure it were the gentleman that come here afore—and another one.’

‘Another one—your master, you mean?’

Jabez grinned from ear to ear.

‘Didsta hear owt?’

‘I heard the gentleman say they had to be at St. Pancras at midnight.’

Paul fumbled at his breast for his watch. It was gone.

‘What’s o’clock?’ he asked.

‘Fifteen after eleven, master,’ said Jabez. ‘I’ve just bolted up.’

Paul’s face was full of resolution.

‘I’ll follow,’ he said, ‘I’ve lost time enough already.’

‘What, man! you’ll never manish it—and you as weak as watter forby. You’ll be falling swat in the road like a wet sack.’

Paul had torn the door open. Excitement lent him strength. The next moment he was gone.

‘Where’s the master off to? St. Pancras?’ asked Jabez.

‘Fadge-te-fadge, gang out of my gate. Away and lig down your daft head in bed,’ said Gubblum.

Jabez did not act on the pedlar’s advice. He returned to the bar to await the return of Mrs. Drayton, whose unaccustomed absence gave rise to many sapient conjectures in the boy’s lachrymose noddle. He found the door to the road open, and from this circumstance his swift intelligence drew the conclusion that his master had already gone. His hand was on the door to close and bolt it, when he heard rapid footsteps approaching. In an instant two men pushed past him and into the house.

‘Where’s Mr. Drayton?’ said one, panting from his run.

‘He’s this minute gone,’ said Jabez.

‘Is that true, my lad?’ the man asked, laying a hand on the boy’s shoulder.

‘He’s gone to St. Pancras, sir. He’s got to be there at midnight,’ said Jabez.

The boy had recognised the visitors, and was trembling.

The men glanced into each other's faces.

'That *was* Drayton—the man that ran past us down the road,' said one.

'Make sure of it,' said the other. 'Search the place ; I'll wait for you here.'

In two minutes more the men had left the house together.

A quarter of an hour later the night porter at the Hendon railway station saw a man run across the platform and leap into the up train, just as the carriages were moving away. He remarked that the man was bare-headed, and wore his clothes awry, and that a rent near the collar of his long frieze ulster exposed a strip of red flannel lining. He thought he knew him.

The train had barely cleared the platform when two men ran up and came suddenly to a stand in front of the porter.

'Gone!' said one of them with vexation.

'That would be the 11.35,' said the other,

‘to King’s Cross. Did any one get into it here, porter?’

‘Yes, Sergeant—Drayton, of the Hawk and Heron,’ said the porter.

‘Your next up is 11.45 to St. Pancras?’

‘Yes, sir, due at twelve.’

‘Is it prompt?’

‘To the second.’

The two men faced about.

‘Time enough yet,’ said one.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE cab that drove Mrs. Drayton into London carried with it a world of memories. Thought in her old head was like the dip of a sea bird in the sea—now here, now there, now a straight flight, and now a backward swirl. As she rattled over the dark roads of Child Hill and the New End she puzzled her confused brain to understand the business on which she had been sent. Why had the gentleman been brought out to Hendon? Why, being ill, was he so soon to be removed? Why, being removed, was he not put back into this cab, and driven to the station for Cumberland? What purpose could be served by sending her to the convent for the gentleman's wife, when the gentleman himself might have been driven

there? Why was the lady in a convent? The landlady pursed up her lips and contracted her wrinkled brows in a vain endeavour to get light out of the gloom of these mysteries.

The thought of the gentleman lying ill in her house suggested many thoughts concerning her son. Paul was not her son, and his name was not Drayton. Whose son he was she never knew, and what his name was she had never heard. But she had fixed and done for him since he was a baby, and no mother could have loved a son more than she had loved her Paul. What a poor puling little one he once was, and how the neighbours used to shake their heads and say :

‘ You’ll never rear it ; there’s a fate on it, poor misbegotten mite !’

That was thirty long years ago, and now Paul was the lustiest young man in Hendon. Ah! it was not Hendon then, but London, and her husband, the good man, was alive and hearty.

‘ It’ll thrive yet, Martha,’ he would say,

and the little one would seem to know him, and would smile and crow when he cracked his fingers over its cot.

Then the landlady thought of the dark days that followed, when bread was scarce and the gossips would say :

‘ Serve you right. What for do you have an extra mouth to feed?—take the brat to the Foundling.’

But her husband, God bless him, had always said :

‘ What’s bite and sup for a child? Keep him, Martha, he’ll be a comfort to ye yet, old woman.’

Mrs. Drayton wiped her eyes as she drove in the dark.

Then the bad times changed, and they left the town and took the inn at Hendon, and then the worst times of all came on them, for as soon as they were snug and comfortable the good man himself died. He lay dying a week, and when the end came he cried for the child.

‘ Give me the boy,’ he said, and she lifted the child into his arms in bed. Then

he raised his thin white hand to stroke the wavy hair, but the poor hand fell into the little one's face.

Mrs. Drayton shifted in her seat and tried to drive away the memories that trod on the heels of these recollections ; but the roads were still dark, and nothing but an empty sky was to be seen, and the memories would not be driven away. She recalled the days when young Paul grew to be a lusty lad---daring, reckless, the first in mischief, the deepest in trouble. And there was no man's hand to check him, and people shook their heads and whispered, 'He'll come to a bad end ; he has the wickedness in his blood.' Poor lad, it was not his fault if he had turned out a little wild and wayward and rough, and cruel to his own mother, as you might say, jostling her when he had a drop to drink, and maybe striking her when he didn't know what he was doing, and never turning his hand to honest work, but always dreaming of fortunes coming some day, and betting and racing, and going here and there, and never resting happy and content

at home. It was not his fault: he had been led astray by bad companions. And then she didn't mind a blow—not she. Every woman had to bear the like of that. You want a world of patience if you have men creatures about you—that's all.

Thinking of bad companions suggested to the landlady's mind, by some strange twist of which she was never fully conscious, the idea of Hugh Ritson. The gentleman who had come so strangely among them appeared to have a curious influence over Paul. He seemed to know something of Paul's mother. Paul himself rummaged matters up long ago, and found that the lady had escaped from the asylum, and been lost. And now the strange gentleman came with her portrait and said she was dead.

Poor soul, how well Mrs. Drayton remembered her! And that was thirty years ago! She had never afterwards set eyes on the lady, and never heard of her but once, and even that once must be five-and-twenty years since. One day she went for coal to the

wharf at Pimlico, and there she met an old neighbour, who said, ‘Mrs. Drayton, your lodger, she that drowned herself, came back for the babby, but your man and you were shifted away.’ And to think that the poor young thing was dead and gone now, and she herself, who had thought she was old even in those days, was alive and hearty still!

By this time the cab was rattling through the busy streets of London, and the train of the landlady’s thoughts was broken. Only in a vague way did she know where she was going. The cab was taking her there, and it would take her back again. When they reached the convent she had to ask for Mrs. Ritson, and say she was sent to take her to St. Pancras Station to meet her husband there, and return to Cumberland by the train at midnight. That was all.

The clock of the Abbey was marking the half hour after eleven as the cab passed into Parliament Square. In another minute they drew up before the convent in Abbey Gardens.

The cabman jumped from the box, rang the bell, and helped Mrs. Drayton to alight. The iron gate and the door in the portico swung open together, and a nun stood on the threshold holding a lamp in her hand. Mrs. Drayton hobbled up the steps and entered the hall. A deep gloom pervaded the wide apartment, in which there were but two wicker chairs and a table. The nun wore a gray serge gown with a whimple cut square on her chest, a girdle about her waist, and a rosary hanging by her side.

‘Can I see a lady boarder, Mrs. Ritson?’ said the landlady.

The nun started a little, and then answered in a low melancholy voice in which the words she spoke were lost. Mrs. Drayton’s eyes were now accustomed to the gloom, and she looked into the nun’s face. It was a troubled and clouded face, and when it was lifted for an instant to her own, Mrs. Drayton felt chilled, as if a death’s-hand had touched her.

It was the face of the mother of Paul. Older, sadder, calmer, but the same face still.

The nun dropped her eyes, and made the sign of the cross. Then she walked with a quick and noiseless step to the other end of the hall, and sounded a deep gong. In a moment this summoned a sister—a novice, dressed like the first, except all in white. Mrs. Drayton was now trembling from head to foot, but she repeated her question, and was led into a bare, chill room, and left alone.

CHAPTER XIX.

WHEN Greta parted from Hugh Ritson three hours before, she was in an agony of suspense. Another strange threat had terrified her. She had been asked to make choice of one of two evils ; refusing to believe in Hugh Ritson's power, she had rejected both. But the uncertainty was terrible. To what lengths might not passion, unrequited passion, defeated passion, outraged passion, lead a man like Hugh Ritson ? Without pity, without remorse, with a will that was relentless and a heart that never knew ruth, he was a man to flinch at no extremity. What had he meant ?

Greta's first impulse had been to go in search of her husband, but this was an idle

and a foolish thought. Where should she look? Besides this, she had promised to remain in the convent until her husband should come for her, and she must keep her word. She did not go in to supper when the gong sounded, but crept up to her room. The bell rang for vespers, and Greta did not go to the chapel. She lay down in anguish and wept scalding tears. The vesper hymn floated up to her where she lay, and she was still weeping. There was no light in this dark place; there was no way out of this maze but to wait and suffer.

And slowly the certainty stole upon her that Hugh Ritson had made no idle threat. He was a resolute man ; he had given her choice of two courses, and had she not taken a selfish part? If Paul, her husband, were indeed in danger—no matter from what machination of villainy—was it much to ask that she, his wife, should rescue him by a sacrifice that fell heaviest upon herself ? Hugh Ritson had been right—her part had been a selfish one. Oh, where was Mr. Christian ? She had telegraphed for him,

and he had answered that he would come ; yet hour had followed hour, and still he had not arrived.

Three hours she tossed in agony. She heard the sisters pass up the echoing stone staircase to their dormitories, and then the silent house became as dumb as a vault. Not a ripple flowed into this still tarn from the great stream of the world, that rushed and surged and swelled with the clangour of a million voices around its encrusted sides.

Her window overlooked the Abbey Gardens. All was quiet beneath. Not a step sounded on the pavement. Before her the blank wall was black, and the dark leafless trees stood out from the vague green of the grass beyond. Against the sky were the dim outlines of the two towers of the old abbey—by day a great rock for the pigeons that wheeled above the tumbling sea of the city, by night a skull of stone from which the voice of the bell told of the flight of time.

Out of the calm of a moment's stupefac-

tion Greta was awakened by a knock at her door. The novice entered and told her that a woman waited below to speak with her. Greta betrayed no surprise, and she was beyond the reach of fresh agitation. Without word or question she followed the novice to the room where Mrs. Drayton sat.

She recognised the landlady and heard her story. Greta's heart leapt up at the thought of rejoining her husband. Here was the answer to the prayer that had gone up she knew not how often from her troubled heart. Soon she would be sure that Hugh Ritson's threat was vain. Soon she would be at Paul's side and hold his hand, and no earthly power should separate them again. Ah, thank God, the merciful Father, who healed the wounded hearts of His children, she should very soon be happy once more, and all the sorrows of these past few days would fade away into a dim memory.

'Twelve o'clock at St. Pancras, and you have the luggage in a cab at the door, you say?'

‘Yes, and there’s no time to lose, for, to be sure, the night is going fast,’ said Mrs. Drayton.

‘And he will be there to meet me?’ asked Greta. Her eyes, still wet with recent tears, danced with a new-found joy.

‘Yes, at St. Pancras,’ said the landlady.

Greta’s happiness overflowed. She took the old woman in her arms and kissed her wizened cheeks.

‘Wait a minute—only a minute,’ she said, and tripped off with the swift glide of a lapwing. But when she was half way up the stairs her ardour was arrested, and she returned with drooping face and steps of lead.

‘But why did he not come for me himself?’ she asked.

‘The gentleman is not well—he is ill,’ said Mrs. Drayton.

‘Ill? You say he is ill? Then he could not come. And I blamed him for not coming!’

‘The gentleman is weak, but noways worse; belike he will go straight off and meet you at the station.’

Greta turned away once again, and went upstairs slowly. At a door on the first landing she tapped lightly, and when a voice answered from within she entered the room.

The Superior was on her knees at a table. She lifted a calm and spiritual face as Greta approached.

'Reverend Mother,' said Greta, 'I am leaving you this moment.'

'So soon, my daughter?'

'My husband has sent for me; he will meet me at the railway-station at twelve.'

'Why did he not come himself?'

'He is ill; he has gone direct.'

'The hour is late and the message is sudden. Are you satisfied?'

'I am anxious. Reverend Mother.'

'What is it, my daughter?'

'An old gentleman, a clergyman, Mr. Christian, is coming from Cumberland. I have expected him hourly, but he is not yet arrived. I cannot wait; I must rejoin my husband. Will you order that a message be left for the clergyman?'

'What is the message, my child?'

‘Simply that I have returned with my husband by the train leaving St. Pancras at midnight.’

‘The lay sister in the hall shall deliver it.’

‘Who is the sister?’

‘Sister Grace.’

There was a silence.

‘Reverend Mother, has Sister Grace ever spoken of the past?’

The Superior told a few beads.

‘The past is as nothing to us here, my daughter. Within these walls the world does not enter. In the presence of the cross the past and the future are one.’

Greta drew a long breath. Then she stooped and kissed the hand of the Superior, and turned softly away.

Greta and the landlady passed out through the deep portico, and the same nun who had opened the door closed it behind them. Mrs. Drayton clung to Greta’s arm as they went through, and her hand trembled perceptibly.

‘Who is she?’ whispered the landlady when they were seated in the cab.

'Sister Grace,' said Greta, and turned her head aside.

'I could ha' sworn as she were the mother of my Paul,' murmured Mrs. Drayton.

Greta faced about, but the landlady saw nothing of the look of inquiry; her eyes, like her thoughts, were far away.

CHAPTER XX.

THOUGH the hour was late, the streets were thronged. The people were trooping home from the theatres ; and the Strand, as Greta and the landlady crossed it, was choked with cabs and omnibuses. The cab drove through the Seven Dials, and there the public-houses were disgorging at every corner their poor ruins of men and women. Shouts, curses, quarrelling, and laughter, struck upon the ear above the whirr of the wheels. Unshaven men, and unwashed women, squalid children running here and there among the oyster and orange stalls, thieves, idlers, vagabonds of all conditions, not a few honest people withal, and among them the dark figures of policemen.

Greta's heart beat high that night. Her

spirit was full of a new alacrity. Every inch of the way, as they flew over the busy streets, seemed to awake in her soul some fresh sensibility. She wondered where the multitudes of people came from, and whither they were going. Vast oceans on oceans of humanity, flowing and ebbing without tide.

She wanted to alight a hundred times, and empty her pockets of all her money. A blind man, playing a tin whistle and leading a small dog held by a long string, awoke her special pity; the plaintive look in the eye of the cur was an object of peculiar sympathy. A filthy woman, reeling drunk and bareheaded across the street, almost under the feet of the horses, her discoloured breast hanging bare, and a puny infant crying feebly in her arms, was another occasion for solicitude. A tiny mite that might have been a dirty boy coiled up in a ball on a doorstep like a starved cat was an object of all but irresistible attraction. But she dare not stop for an instant; and at last, with this certainty, she lay back and

shut her eyes very resolutely, and wondered whether, after all, it were not very selfish to be very happy.

The cab stopped with a jolt; they were at St. Pancras Station.

‘Has he come?’ asked Greta eagerly, and looked about her with eyes that comprehended everything at a glance.

She could not see Paul, and, when a porter opened the cab and helped her to alight, it was on her tongue to ask the man if he had seen her husband. But no, she would not do that. She must look for him herself, so that she might be the first to see him. Oh, yes, she must be the very first to see him, and she was now obstinately determined to ask no one.

The porter brought round the truck, and wheeled the luggage on to the platform, and Greta and Mrs. Drayton followed it. Then the wide eyes that half-smiled and looked half-afraid beneath their trembling lids glanced anxiously around. No, Paul was not there.

‘What is the time?’ she asked, her eyes

still wandering over the bustling throng about her.

‘Ten to twelve, miss,’ announced the porter.

‘Oh,’ she said with a sigh of relief, ‘then he will soon be here.’

‘Will you sit in the waiting-room, miss?’ asked the porter ; and almost unconsciously she followed him when he led the way. Mrs. Drayton hobbled behind her.

‘What did he say about being ill?’ she asked when they were left together.

‘That he was only a bit dizzy. Mayhap he’s noways ’customed to illness,’ said the landlady.

‘That is true. And what did you say then ?

‘I coaxed him to rest him a bit, and take a drop o’ summat, and he smiled and said, “Thank you, my good woman.”’

‘You were in the right, you dear old soul,’ said Greta. And she put her arms about the landlady and hugged her. ‘I’m sure you have been very good to my husband, and watched him tenderly, while I,

who should have nursed him, have been away. Thank you, thank you.'

Mrs. Drayton was feeling uneasy. 'Well, d'ye know, I can't abear to see a fellow creatur' suffer. It goes agen me someways.'

Greta had risen to her feet. 'Stay here, Mrs. Drayton—Drayton, isn't it?—stay here while I go on to the platform. He might come and not see me. Ah, yes, he may be looking everywhere for me now.'

She went out and elbowed her way among the people who were hurrying to and fro ; she dodged between trucks that were sliding luggage on to the weighing machine and off to the van. The engines were puffing volumes of smoke and steam up to the great glass roof, where the whistle of the engineer echoed sharp and shrill. Presently she returned to the waiting-room. 'Oh, Mrs. Drayton,' she said, 'I dreamed a fearful dream last night. What do you think ? Will he be well enough to come ?'

'Coorse, coorse, my dear. "Tell her to meet her husband at twelve." Them's the gentleman's own words.'

'How happy I shall be when we are safe at home! And if he is ill, it will be for me to nurse him then.'

The light in the dove-like eyes at that moment told plainly that to the poor soul even illness might bring its compensating happiness.

'And as to dreams, to be sure, they are on'y dreams ; and what's dreams, say I ?'

'You are right, Mrs. Drayton,' said Greta, and once more she shot away towards the platform. Her mind had turned to Parson Christian. Could it be possible that he had arrived? The porter who had brought in her luggage was still standing beside it, and with him there was another porter. Their backs were towards Greta as she came out of the waiting-room, and, tripping lightly behind them, she overheard a part of their conversation before they were aware that she was near.

'See the old file in the gaiters by the eleven up?' said one.

'Rather. A reg'lar grandmother's great-grandfather just out of the year one. Talk

about swallows, eh?—and the buckles—and the stockings!'

'Good sort, how-an'-ever.'

'Good for a tip, eh? Wouldn't ha' thought it.'

'No, but a real good-hearted un an' it he *is* a Pape.'

'Never?'

'To be sure. Got me to put him in a fly for the Catholic convent up Westminster way.'

Greta could restrain herself no longer, but burst in upon them with twenty questions. When had the parson arrived? When had he left? Was it in a fly? Would it go quickly? Could there be time for it to get back?

'What's your train, miss—twelve to the north?'

'Yes, will he catch it?'

'Scarce get back at twelve,' said the porter. But, in spite of this discouraging prophecy, Greta was so elated at the fresh intelligence that she drew out her purse and gave the man five shillings. She had no other change

than two half-crowns and two pennies, and in her present elevation of soul there could be no choice, between the silver and the copper, as to which the bearer of such news deserved.

The man stared, and then smiled, but he quickly reconciled himself to the unexpected. With extraordinary alacrity he labelled the luggage, and bowled off to the north train, which was already at the platform.

It was now within three minutes of midnight, and Mrs. Drayton had joined Greta in the bustling throng on the platform.

‘Oh, I feel as if a thousand hearts were all swelling and beating in my breast at once,’ said Greta. ‘Mrs. Drayton, is it certain that he will come? Porter, have you put the luggage in the van? Which is the train—the left?’

‘No, miss, the left’s going out to make room for the local train up from Kentish Town and Hendon. The right’s your train, miss. Got your ticket, miss?’

‘Not yet. Must I get it, think you? Is the time short? Yes, I will get two

tickets, myself,' she added, turning to the landlady. 'Then when he comes he will have nothing to do but step into the carriage.'

'You'll have to be quick, miss—train's nigh due out—only a minute,' said the porter.

Greta's luminous eyes were peering over the heads of the people that were about her. Then they brightened, with a flash more swift than lightning, and all her face wore in an instant a heavenly smile. 'Ah, he is there—there at the back—at the booking-office—run to him, run, my good dear creature ; run and tell him I am here. I'll find a compartment and have the door open.'

Greta tripped along the platform with the foot of a deer. In another moment she had a carriage door open, and she stood there with the handle in her hand. She saw him coming who was more than all the world to her. But she did not look twice. No, she would not look twice. She would wait until they were within, alone, together.

Side by side with him walked Hugh

Ritson! Could it be possible? And was it he who had brought her husband? Ah! he had repented, and it was only she who had been bitter to the end. How generous of him ; how cruel of her!

Her eyes fell, and a warm flush overspread her cheeks as he, who came first, stepped into the carriage. She did not look again at him, nor did he look again at her. She knew he did not, though her eyes were down. ‘Oh, when we are alone!’ she thought, and then she turned to Hugh Ritson.

The heavenly smile was still on her beautiful face, and the deep light in her eyes spoke of mingled joy and grief.

‘Hugh, I fear, I fear,’ she faltered, ‘I have been hard and cruel. Let us be friends ; let me be your dearest sister.’

He looked at her in silence. His infirm foot trailed a pace. He saw what was in her heart, and he knew well what was in his own heart too ; he thought of the blow that he was about to strike her.

She held out her hand, and took in hers

his own unresisting fingers. Aye, he knew that there and then he was about to break that forgiving heart for ever. He knew who had stepped into that carriage.

She leaned forward and kissed his cheek. The man in him could bear up no longer. He broke down ; he could not speak ; he was choked with emotion.

She turned to the landlady, who stood near, twitching at the ribbons of her bonnet and peering into the carriage.

‘Good-bye, Mrs. Drayton, and God bless you for what you have done for my husband.’

The landlady muttered something that was inaudible ; she was confused ; she stammered, and then was silent.

Greta stepped into the carriage. The guard was standing at the door. The bell had been rung. The train had been signalled. The whistle had sounded. The clocks were striking midnight.

‘Wait! Wait!’

It was a voice from the end of the platform. The guard turned with a smile

to see who called on a train to wait. An old gentleman in silk stockings and gaiters, with long white hair flowing under the broad brim of a low-crowned hat, came panting to the only door that was still held open.

‘Quick, sir, it’s moving ; in with you.’

‘Mr. Christian !’ cried Greta, and throwing her arms about him, she drew him into the carriage. Then the train began to move away.

At that instant another train—the local train from Kentish town and Hendon—steamed up to the opposite side of the platform. Before it had stopped two men leapt out. They were the two police-sergeants in pursuit of Paul Ritson. Instantly—simultaneously—a man burst through the barrier and ran on to the platform from the street. He was bare-headed, and his face was ghastly white.

In one moment the police-sergeants had laid hands upon him. The train to the north had not yet cleared the platform. He

saw it passing out. His eyes flashed ; he took hold of the hands by which he was held and threw them off as if their grasp had been the grasp of a child. Then he bounded away towards the retreating train. He tried to leap on to the footboard of the last carriage. The train was now moving rapidly. He failed. Amid shouts from the porters and screams from men and women who looked on, he leaped down into the four-feet way, ran after the guard's van, and tried to fling himself on to the buffer at the back. But the engine was going at high speed.

It was gone ; it was swallowed up in the dark mouth beyond, and the man stood behind, bareheaded, dripping with perspiration, yet white as ashes, his clothes awry, the collar of his frieze ulster torn away, and a strip of red flannel lining exposed.

It was Paul Ritson.

The police-sergeants hurried up with the reinforcement of two porters to recover their man. But he was quiet enough now. He did not stir a muscle when they hand-

cuffed him. He looked around with vague, vacant eyes, hardly seeming to realize where he was or what was being done with him. His frenzy was gone.

They led him down the platform. Hugh Ritson was standing on the spot where Greta had left him one minute before. When the company neared that spot the prisoner stopped. He looked across at Hugh Ritson in silence, and for an instant the dazed look died off his face. Then he turned his head aside, and allowed himself to be led quietly away.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE Chapter-room of St. Margaret's Convent was a chill, bare chamber, containing an oak table and four or five plain oak chairs. On the painted walls, which were of dun gray there were an etching by a Florentine master of the flight into Egypt and a symbolic print of the Sacred Heart. Beside these pictures there was but a single text to relieve the blindness of the empty walls, and it ran : ‘Where the tree falls, there it must lie.’

Four days after Greta’s departure from the house wherein she had been received as a temporary boarder, the Superior sat in the chapter-room, and a sister knelt at her feet. The sister’s habit was gray, and her linen cape was plain. She wore no scapular, and

no hood above the close cap that hid her hair and crossed her forehead. She was, therefore, a lay sister ; she was Sister Grace.

‘Mother, hear my sin,’ she said in a trembling whisper.

‘ Speak on, daughter.’

‘ We were both at Athlone in the year of the great famine. He was an officer in a regiment quartered there. I was a novice of the choir in the Order of Charity. We met in scenes sanctified by religion. Oh, mother, the famine was sore, and he was kind to the famished people. “The hunger is on us,” they would cry, as if it had been a plague of locusts. It was thus, with their shrill voices and wan faces, that the ragged multitudes followed us. Yes, mother, he was very, very kind to the people.’

‘ Well ?’

The penitent bowed her head yet lower. ‘ My mother, I renounced the vows, and— we were married.’

The lips of the Superior moved in silent prayer.

‘ What was his name, my daughter ? ’

‘ Robert Lowther. We came from Ireland to London. A child was born, and we called him Paul. Then my husband’s love grew chill and died. I grieved over him. Perhaps I was but a moody companion. At last he told me—’

The voice faltered ; the whole body quivered.

‘ Well, my child ? ’

‘ Oh, mother, he told me I was not his wife ; that I was a Catholic, but that he was a Protestant ; that a Catholic priest had married us in Ireland without question or inquiry. That was not a valid marriage by English law.’

‘ Shame on the English law. But what do we know of the law at the foot of the cross ? Well ? ’

‘ He left me. Mother, I flung God’s good gift away. I tried to drown myself, and my little child with me ; but they prevented me. I was placed in an asylum for the insane, and my baby—my Paul—was given into the care of a woman with

whom I had lodged. Have I not sinned deeply?

‘Your sins are great, my daughter, but your sufferings have also been great. What happened then?’

‘I escaped from the asylum and returned for my child. It was gone. The woman had removed to some other part of London, none knew where, and my Paul, my darling, was lost to me for ever. My mother, it was then that I sinned deepest of all.’

Her head was bowed to her trembling knees, and her voice was all but suspended in an agony of shame.

‘Mother, I flung away God’s better gift than life. Oh, how shall I tell you? Your foot trembles, reverend mother. You are a holy woman, and know nothing of the world’s temptations.’

‘Hush, my daughter; I am as great a sinner as yourself.’

‘I cannot tell you. Mother, mother, you see I cannot.’

‘It is for your soul’s weal, my daughter.’

‘I had tried to serve God, and He had

seen my shame. What was left to me but the world, the world, the world! Perhaps the world itself would have more mercy. My kind mother, have I not told you yet?’

The Superior made the sign of the cross.

‘Ah, my daughter! the enemy of your soul was with you then. You should not have ceased to lift your hands to heaven in supplication and prayer. You should have prostrated yourself three days and nights in the tribune before the holy sacrament.’

The penitent raised her pale face.

‘In less time I was a lost and abandoned woman.’

The Superior told a few beads with trembling fingers. Then she lifted the cross that hung from her girdle, and held it out to the sister.

‘I thought of my child, and prayed that he might be dead. I thought of him who was not my husband, and my heart grew cold and hard. Mother, my redemption came. Yes, but with it came the meaning of the fearful words, *too late*. Amid the reeling madness of the life that is mocked

with the name of gay, I met a good man. Yes, holy mother, a good man. Mother, he now sleeps THERE.'

Her pale face, serene and solemn, was lifted again, and the hand that held the crucifix was raised above her head.

'I loathed my life. He took me away from it—to the mountains—to Scotland, and a child was born. Mother, it was only then that I awoke as from a trance. It seemed as if a ring of sin begirt me. Tears; ah me! what tears were shed. But rest and content came at last, and then we were married.'

'My daughter, my daughter, little did I think when I received your vows that the enemy of your soul had so mastered you.'

'Listen a little longer, holy mother. The child grew to be the image of my darling, my Paul—every feature, every glance the same. And partly to remind me of my lost one, and partly to make me forget him for ever, I called the second child Paul. Mother, the years went by in peace. The past was gone from me. Only its memory lay like a

waste in my silent heart. I had another son, and called him Hugh. After many years my husband died.' The penitent paused.

'Mother, another thing comes back to me; but I have confessed it already. Shall I repeat it?'

'No, my daughter, not if it touches the oath that lay heavy on your heart.'

'I thought my first child was dead. For thirty years I had not seen him. But the pathways of our lives crossed at last. And the woman who nursed him came to this house four days ago.'

'Here?'

'Mother, my son, the child of that first false union, my darling, for whom I wept scalding tears long, long years ago; my Paul whose loss was all but the loss of his mother's soul, my son is a thief and an outcast.'

The lips of the Superior moved again in prayer.

'He is the man known to the world as Paul Drayton—to me as Paul Lowther.'

'My dear daughter, humble yourself in

the midst of so awful a judgment. Do you say Drayton?—Drayton, who, as I hear, was to-day tried and sentenced?

‘No—yes—how shall I tell you?—the same and not the same. Mother, the crime was committed by my son Paul Lowther. The sentence was pronounced on my son Paul Ritson.’

‘My dear daughter——’

‘I was in the court, and heard all; and I alone knew all—I alone, alone! Bear with me that I transgressed the law of this holy order. Think, oh! my kind mother, think that the nun was yet the woman, and, above all, the mother. Yes; I heard all. I heard the charge that convicted my son Paul Lowther. He was guilty before God and man. But the prisoner in the dock was my son Paul Ritson. I knew him, and believed him when he denied the name they gave him. Ah me, my heart bled!’

‘What did you do, my daughter?’

‘Mother, I was weak, very weak. I could not see my duty clearly. An awful conflict was rife within me. I could not justify the

one man without condemning the other. And both were the children of my bosom.'

'Fearful, fearful! But, my daughter, the one was guilty and the other innocent.'

'Yes, yes, a thousand times yes; but then there was myself. How could I punish the guilty without revealing the secret sin that had been thirty years hidden in my heart? And my poor weak spirit shrank within me, and I sat silent amid all.'

'My daughter, we must crucify our spiritual pride.'

'Yes, yes; but there was the love of my son Paul Ritson—and he thought me a good woman even yet. How could I confess to that sinful past and not lose the love of the only human soul that held me pure and true? Mother, it is very sweet to be loved.'

'Oh, my daughter, my daughter, a terrible situation, terrible, terrible!'

'Mother, I have told you everything. Tell me now what hope is left. Give me your direction.'

'My daughter, let us humble ourselves

before God, and pray that He may reveal the path of duty. Come.'

The Superior rose, took her crosier in her hand, and walked out of the room. The sister followed her. They passed through the sacristy into the empty church.

It was evening. The glow of a wintry sunset came through the windows to the west, and fell in warm gules on the altar. There was the hush of the world's awe here as day swooned into night. Without these walls were turmoil and strife. Within was the balm of rest—the rest that lies in the heart of the cyclone.

And the good mother and the sister went down on their knees together, and prayed for light and guidance. The mother rose, but the sister knelt on ; darkness fell, and she was still kneeling, and when the east was dabbled with the dawn, the gray light fell on her bowed head and uplifted hands.

CHAPTER XXII.

A MORNING paper of November contained the following paragraph in its summary of the news of the day:

‘It will be remembered that in the reports of the disastrous railway collision which occurred at Hendon on Friday last it was mentioned as a ghastly accessory to the story of horror that an injured passenger, who had been lifted from the debris of broken carriages, and put to lie out of harm’s way in a field close at hand, was brutally assaulted and (apparently) robbed by some unknown scoundrel, who, though detected in the act itself, tore himself from the grasp of Police-Sergeant Cox, of the Hendon division of the Metropolitan police-force, and escaped into the darkness. The

authorities were determined that their vigilance should not be eluded, and a person named Paul Drayton is now in custody, and will be brought up at Bow Street this morning. It turns out that Drayton is an innkeeper at Hendon, where he has long borne a dubious character. He was arrested at midnight in St. Pancras Station in a daring and mad attempt to escape by the North train, and it is understood that the incident of his capture is such as reflects the highest credit on the resolution, energy, and intrepidity of the force.'

The same paper of the day after contained this further paragraph:

'The man Drayton, who was yesterday formally committed to take his trial at the Central Criminal Court, will be brought up at the Old Bailey as early as to-morrow; and, as the evidence is said to be of a simple and unconflicting character, it is not expected that the hearing will extend itself over a single day. It is stated that the accused, who observed a rigid silence during yesterday's proceedings, will, on his trial, set

up the extraordinary defence of mistaken identity. If this is an attempt (as is hinted) to attract public attention and excite mere-tricious sympathy, it will probably fail of its object at such a moment of political excitement as the present.'

An evening paper of Friday, November, —, contained the following remarks in the course of a leading notet:

'It is a familiar legal maxim that a plea of *alibi* that breaks down is the worst of all accusations. The scoundrel that attempted to rob a dying man, who lay helpless and at his mercy amid the confusion of Friday night's accident at Hendon, was audacious enough to put forth the defence that he was not the man he was taken for. Cases of mistaken identity are of course common enough in the annals of jurisprudence, but we imagine the instances are rare indeed of evidence of identity so exceptional and conclusive as that which convicted the Hendon innkeeper being susceptible of error. The very clothes he wore in the dock bore their own witness to his guilt, and the court saw

the police-sergeant produce a scrap of cloth torn from the guilty man's back, which exactly fitted a rent in the prisoner's ulster. The whole case would be a case of criminality too gross and palpable to merit a syllable of comment but for the astounding assurance with which the accused adhered to his plea in the face of evidence that was so complete as to make denial little more than a farce. He denied that he was Paul Drayton, and said his name was Paul Ritson. He was identified as Drayton by several witnesses who have known him from infancy; among others by his old mother, Martha Drayton, whose evidence (given with reluctance and with more tears than a son so unnatural deserved) was at once as damning and as painful as anything of the kind ever heard in a court of justice. The claim to be Paul Ritson was answered by the evidence of Mr. Hugh Ritson, mine-owner in Cumberland, and brother of the gentleman whom the prisoner wished to personate. Mr. H. Ritson admitted a resemblance, but had no hesitation in saying that the accused

was not his brother. The prisoner thereupon applied to the court that the wife of the said Paul Ritson should be examined, but, as it was explained that both husband and wife were at present ill in Cumberland, the court wisely ruled against the application. As a final freak of defence, the prisoner asked for the examination of one Mercy Fisher, who, he said, would be able to say by what circumstances he came to wear the clothes of the guilty man. The court adjourned for an hour in order that this person might be produced, but on the re-assembling it was explained that the girl, who turned out to be a mistress whom Drayton had kept at his mother's house, had disappeared. Thus, with a well-merited sentence of three years' penal servitude, ended a trial of which the vulgarity of detail was only equalled by the audacity of defence.'

A week passed, and the public had almost forgotten the incidents of the trial, when the following paragraph appeared in a weekly journal:

‘I hear that the man who was sentenced to three years’ penal servitude for robbery at the scene of the Hendon accident was seized with an attack of brain fever immediately upon his arrival at Millbank. The facts that transpire within that place of retirement are whispered with as much reserve as guards the secrets of another kind of confessional, but I do hear that since the admission of the man who was known on his trial as Paul Drayton, and who is now indicated by a numerical cognomen, certain facts have come to light which favour the defence he set up of mistaken identity. I have it on good authority that the officials of the Home Office are investigating these facts, and that the result is likely to show another shameful miscarriage of justice, arising largely out of the indecent haste with which cases involving grave issues are sometimes scamped through our courts.’

BOOK FOURTH.

THE WATERS OF MARAH ARE BITTER.

CHAPTER I.

IN THE YEAR 1877.

THE dale lay green in the morning sunlight ; the river that ran through its lowest bed sparkled with purple and amber ; the leaves prattled low in the light breeze that souched through the rushes and the long grass ; the hills rose sheer and white to the smooth blue lake of the sky, where only one fleecy cloud floated languidly across from peak to peak. Out of unseen places came the bleating of sheep and the rumble of distant cataracts, and above the dull thud of tumbling waters far away was the thin carolling of birds overhead.

But the air was alive with yet sweeter sounds. On the breast of the fell that lies over against Cat Bells a procession of children walked, and sang, and chattered,

and laughed. It was St. Peter's Day, and they were rush-bearing : little ones of all ages, from the comely girl of fourteen, just ripening into maidenhood, who walked last, to the sweet boy of four in the pinafore braided with epaulettes, who strode along gallantly in front. Most of the little hands carried rushes, but some were filled with ferns, and mosses, and flowers. They had assembled at the schoolhouse, and now, on their way to the church, they were making the circuit of the dale.

They passed over the road that crosses the river at the head of Newlands, and turned down into the path that follows the bed of the valley. At that angle there stands a little group of cottages deliciously cool in their whitewash, nestling together under the heavy purple crag from which the waters of a ghyll fall into a deep basin that reaches to their walls. The last of the group is a cottage with its end to the road, and its open porch facing a garden shaped like a wedge. As the children passed this house an old man, gray and thin and much bent,

stood by the gate, leaning on a staff. A collie, with the sheep-dog's wooden bar suspended from its shaggy neck, lay at his feet. The hum of voices brought a young woman into the porch. She was bare-headed and wore a light print gown. Her face was pale and marked with lines. She walked cautiously, stretching one hand before her with an uncertain motion, and grasping a trailing tendril of honeysuckle that swept downward from the roof. Her eyes, which were partly inclined upwards and partly turned towards the procession, had a vague light in their bleached pupils. She was blind. At her side, and tugging at her other hand, was a child of a year and a half —a chubby, sunny little fellow with ruddy cheeks, blue eyes, and fair curly hair.

Prattling, laughing, singing snatches, and waving their rushes and ferns above their happy, thoughtless heads, the children rattled past. When they were gone the air was empty, as it is when the lark stops in its song.

The church of Newlands stands in the

heart of the valley, half hidden by a clump of trees. By the lych-gate Parson Christian stood that morning; aged a little, the snow a thought thicker on his bushy hair, the face mellower, the liquid eyes full of the sunlight behind which lies the shower. Greta stood beside him; quieter of manner than in the old days, a deeper thoughtfulness in her face, her blue eyes more grave and less restless, her fair hair no longer falling in waves behind her, but gathered up into a demure knot under her hat.

‘Here they come, bless their innocent hearts!’ said Parson Christian, and at that moment the children turned an angle of the road.

The pink and white of their frocks and pinafores were all but hidden by the little forest of green that they carried before and above them.

“‘Till Burnam wood do come to Dunsinane,’” muttered Greta, smiling.

When the rush-bearers came up to the front of the church, the lych-gate was thrown open and they filed through.

'How tired he looks, the brave little boy,' said Greta, picking up the foremost of the company, the tiny man in the epaulettes, now covered with the dust of the roads.

'The little ones first, and you great girls afterwards,' said the Parson. 'Those with flowers go up to the communion and lay them on the form, and those with mosses put them on the font, and those with rushes and ferns begin under the pulpit and come down the aisle to the porch.'

The stalwart little tramp in Greta's arms wriggled his way to the ground. He had mosses in his hand and must go first. Then the children trooped into the church, and in an instant the rude old place was alive with the buzz of prattling tongues.

The floor covered many a tomb. Graven on the plain slabs that formed the pathway down the middle of the church were the names of the men and women who had lived and died in the dale generations gone by. In their own day they were children themselves ; and now other children, their own children's children's children—with never a

thought about what lay beneath, with only love in their eyes, and laughter on their lips, and life in their limbs—were strewing rushes down the path above them.

In ten minutes there was not an inch of the flagged aisle visible. All was green from the communion to the porch. Here and there an adventurous lad, turning to account the skill at climbing acquired at birds'-nesting, had clambered over the pews to the rude crosstrees and hung great bunches of rushes from the roof.

‘Now children, let us sing,’ said the Parson, and taking up the accordion he started a hymn.

The leaded windows of the old church stood open, and the sweet young voices floated away, and far away, over the uplands and the dale. And the birds still sang in the blue sky, and the ghylls still rumbled in the distance, and the light wind still souched through the long grass, and the morning sunlight shone over all.

There was a cloud of dust on the road,

and presently there came trooping down from the village a company of men, surrounded by a whole circuit of dogs. Snarls and yaps, and yelps, and squawks, and guffaws, and sometimes the cachinnation and crow of cocks, broke upon the clear air. The roystering set would be as many as a dozen, and all were more or less drunk. First came John Proudfoot, the blacksmith, in his shirtsleeves, with his leatheren apron wrapped in a knot about his waist, and a silver and black gamecock imprisoned under his arm. Lang Geordie Moore, his young helper, carried another fowl. Dick o' the Syke, the miller, in a brown coat whitened with flour, walked abreast of Geordie and tickled the gills of the fowl with a straw. Job Sheepshanks, the letter-cutter, carried a pot of pitch and a brush, and little Tom o' Dint hobbled along with a handful of iron files. Behind these came the landlord of the Flying Horse with a basket over one arm, from which peeped the corks of many bottles, and Natt, the stableman at the Ghyll, carried a wicker cage, in which sat

a red bantam-cock with spurs that glittered in the light.

There was one other man who walked with the company, and he was the soul of the noisy crew; his voice was the loudest, his laugh the longest, and half of all that was said was addressed to him. He was a lusty man with a florid face; he wore a suit of tweeds plaided in wide stripes of buff and black.

It was Paul Drayton.

‘Burn my body, and what’s on now?’ he said as the gang reached the church.

‘Rush-bearing, I reckon,’ answered Tom o’ Dint.

‘And what’s rush-bearing?’

‘*You* know, Mister Paul,’ said the post-man, ‘rush-bearing—the barns rush-bearing—St. Peter’s Day, you know.’

‘Oh, ay, *I* know—rush-bearing. Let me see, ain’t it once a year?’

‘What, man, but you mind the days when you were a bit boy and went a-rushing yersel?’ said the blacksmith.

‘Coorse, coorse, oh, ay, I ain’t forgotten

them days. Let me see, it's a kind of a harvest-home, ain't it?’

‘Nowt o' the sort,’ said Dick, the miller, testily. ‘Your memory's failing fast, Mister Ritson.’

‘And that's true, old fence. I'll never be the same man again after that brain fever I had up in London—not in the head-piece, you know.’

The group of men and dogs had drawn up in front of the church just as Brother Peter crossed the churchyard to the porch, carrying a red paper in his hand.

‘Who's that—the Methodee man?’

‘It's the Methodee for sure,’ said the blacksmith.

‘Ey, it's the Parson's Peter,’ added the postman, ‘and yon paper is a telegraph—it's like he's takin' it to somebody.’

‘Hold hard, my boys,’ said Drayton; and, leaving his cronies, he strode through the lych-gate and down the path, the dogs yapping around him.

Brother Peter had drawn up at the door of the porch; the children were still singing.

‘If that telegram is for my wife, you may hand it over to me,’ said Drayton, and reached out his hand to take it.

Brother Peter drew back.

‘It will be all right, old fellow—I’ll see she gets it.’

‘Ey, thoo’ll manish that, I’s warn,’ said Peter, in a caustic voice.

‘Come, don’t you know that what belongs to the wife belongs to the husband?’

‘Don’t know as I do. I’s never been larn’t sec daftness,’ said Peter.

‘Hand it over. Come, be quick.’

‘Get ower me ’at can,’ said Peter, with a decisive twinkle.

‘Gi’e him a slab ower the lug,’ shouted the miller from the road.

‘You hear what they say? Come, out with it.’

‘Ey, you’ve rowth o’ friends, you’re a teeran crew, but I cares laal for any on you.’

Drayton turned away with a contemptuous snort.

‘Damme, what a clatter,’ he shouted, and leapt on to the raised mound of a grave to

look in at an open window. As he did so he kicked a glass for flowers that lay upon it, and the broken frame tumbled in many pieces. ‘I’ve done for somebody’s money,’ he said with a loud guffaw.

‘What, man, but it were thy awn brass as bought it,’ said the blacksmith.

‘Ey, it’s thy fadder’s grave,’ said Job Sheepshanks.

Drayton glanced down at the headstone.

‘Why, so it is,’ he said; ‘d’ye see, I hain’t been here since the day I buried him.’

‘Nay, that’s all stuff and nonsense,’ said Job. ‘I mind the morning I found ye lying wet and frostit on the top of that grave.’

‘D’ye say so? Well, I ain’t for denying it; and now I think of it, I *was*—yes, I *was* here that morning.’

‘Nay, you warn’t nowt o’ the sort,’ said the blacksmith. ‘That were the varra morning as Giles Raisley saw you at the Pack Horse sleeping. I mind the fratch Job had with laal Gubblum about it lang ago.’

'It's all stuff and nonsense,' replied Job.
'He were here.'

'The Pack Horse? Well, now, I remember I *was* there, too.'

The singing had ceased, and Greta came out into the porch on tiptoe, carrying in her arms a tiny mite, who was crying. Peter handed her the telegram, and turned up the path.

Drayton had rejoined his companions, and was in the act of knocking the neck off a bottle by striking it against the wall, when Peter walked through the lych-gate.

'Teem a pint o' yal down the Methodee's back,' shouted Dick, the miller, and in another moment Brother Peter was covered with the contents of the broken bottle.

A loud roystering laugh filled the air, and echoed from the hills.

'What a breck!' tittered the postman.

'What a breck!' shouted the blacksmith.

'What a breck!' roared the miller.

'Get ower me 'at can,' mimicked Natt.

'He's got a lad's heart, has Mister Paul,' said the landlord of the Flying Horse.

‘Ey, he’s a fair fatch,’ echoed little Tom o’ Dint.

Leaving Peter to shake himself dry of the liquor that dripped from him in froth, the noisy gang reeled down the road, the yelping dogs careering about them, and the cocks squawking with the hugs they received from the twitching arms of the men convulsed with laughter.

At the head of the Vale of Newlands there is a clearing that was made by the lead-miners of two centuries ago. It lies at the feet of an amphitheatre of hills that rise peak above peak, and die off, depth beyond depth. Of the old mines nothing remains but the level cuttings in the sides of the fells, and here and there the washing-pits cut out of the rock at your feet. Fragments of stone lie about, glistening with veins of lead, but no sound of pick or hammer breaks the stillness, and no cart or truck trundles over the rough path. It is a solitude in which one might forget that the world is full of noise.

To this spot Drayton and his cronies

made their way. At one of the old washing troughs they drew up, and sat in a circle on its rocky sides. They had come for a cockfight. It was to be the bantam (carried by Natt and owned by his master) against all comers. Drayton and the blacksmith were the setters-on. The first bout was between the bantam and Lang Geordie's ponderous black Spanish. Geordie's bird soon squawked dolorously, and made off over the heads of the derisive spectators, whereupon Geordie captured it by one of its outstretched wings, and forthwith screwed its neck. Then came John Proudfoot's silver and black, and straight-way steel gaffs were affixed to the spurs. When the cocks felt their feet they crowed, and then pecked the ground from side to side. An exciting struggle ensued. Up and down, over and under, now beating the breast, now trailing the comb, now pecking at the gills. And the two men at opposite sides of the pit—the one in his shirt-sleeves rolled up to the elbows, the other in his sporting plaid—stooped with every lunge

and craned their necks with every fall, and bobbed their heads with every peck, their eyes flashing, their teeth set.

At one moment they drew off their birds, called for the files, and sharpened up the spurs. Later on they seized the cocks by the necks, shouted for the pitch-pot, and patched up the bleeding combs. The birds were equally matched, and fought long. At last their strength ebbed away. They followed each other feebly, stretching their long lagging throats languidly, opening their beaks and hanging out their dry white tongues, turning tail, then twisting about and fighting again, until both lay stretched out on the pit bottom.

As the energy of the cocks subsided, the ardour of the men waxed sensibly. They yelled excitedly, protested, reviled, swore, laughed, jeered, and crowded.

At length, when the bantam fell and gave no signs of a speedy resurrection, the anger of Drayton could not be supported. He leapt across the pit, his face red as his cock's comb, and shouting, 'Damme, what

for did ye pick up my bird?' he planted a blow full on the blacksmith's chest.

A fight of a yet fiercer kind followed. Amid shouts, and in the thick of a general scuffle, the blacksmith closed with his powerful adversary, gripped him about the waist, twisted him on his loins, and brought him to the ground with a crash. Then he stood over him with fierce eyes.

'I mak' no doubt you're not hankerin' for another of that sort,' he puffed.

'John's given him the cross-buttock,' said the miller.

'The master's lost all his wrustling,' said Natt, blinking out of his sleepy eyes.

'I mind the day when he could have put John down same as a bit boy,' said the little postman.

Natt helped Drayton to his feet. He was quiet enough now, but as black in the face as a thundercloud.

'This comes of a gentleman mixing with them as is beneath him,' he muttered, and he mopped his perspiring forehead with a bandana handkerchief.

The miller snurted, the mason grunted, the little postman laughed in his thin pipe.

Drayton's eyes flashed.

'I'm a gentleman, I am, if you want to know,' he said defiantly.

The blacksmith stood by, leisurely rolling down his shirt-sleeves.

'Ey, for fault of wise folk we call you so,' he said, and laughed. 'But when I leet of a *man*, I's rather have him nor a hundred see *gentlemen* as you.'

'Thoo's reet for once, John,' shouted Dick o' the Syke, and there was some general laughter.

'Gentleman! Ax the woman folk what they mak' of see a *gentleman*,' continued the blacksmith with contemptuous emphasis. 'Him as larn't folks to fill the public and empty the cupboard.'

There was a murmur among the men as they twisted about.

'Ax them what they mak' of him 'at spent four days in Lunnon and came back another man—ax the woman folk ; they're maistly reet, I reckon.'

Another uneasy movement among the men.

‘Burn my body! and what’s the women to me?’ said Drayton.

‘Nay, nowt,’ answered the blacksmith. ‘Your awn wife seems noways powerful keen for your company.’

Drayton’s eyes were red, but the fire died out of them in an instant. He stepped up to the blacksmith and held out his hand.

‘You’ve licked me,’ he said in another tone, ‘but I ain’t the man to keep spite, *I ain’t*; so come along, old fence, and lets wet it.’

‘That’s weel said,’ put in Tommy Lowthwaite, the landlord.

‘It’s no’but fair,’ said Dick the Miller.

‘He’s a reet sort, after all,’ said Job the mason.

‘He’s his awn fadder’s son is Paul Ritson,’ said Tom o’ Dint.

In two minutes more the soiled company were trampling knee-deep through rank beds of rushes on their way to the other

side of the dale. They stopped a few yards from a pit shaft with its head-gear and wheel.

‘Let’s take my brother’s ken for it,’ said Drayton, and they turned into a one-story house that stood near.

It was a single capacious chamber, furnished more like a library than an office : carpets, rugs, a cabinet, easy chairs, and a solid table in the middle of the floor. The cockfighters filed in and sat down on every available chair, on the table, and at last, on the floor.

‘Squat and whiff,’ said Drayton, ‘and, Tommy, you out with the corks quick.’

‘It must be a bonny money-making consarn to keep up the like of this,’ said the miller, settling himself uneasily in an easy chair.

Dick was telling himself what a fool he had been not to ask more than the fifty pounds he received for the damage once done by fire to his mill.

‘Have you never heard as it ain’t all gold as glitters?’ said Drayton; and he struck a

lucifer match on the top of the mahogany table.

‘What, man, dusta mean as the pit’s not paying?’ said the blacksmith.

Drayton gave his head a sidelong shake of combined astuteness and reserve.

‘I mak’ no doubt now as you have to lend Master Hugh many a gay penny,’ said Tom o’ Dint in an insinuating tone.

‘Least said, soonest mended,’ said Drayton sententiously, and smiled a mighty knowing smile.

Then the men laughed, and the landlord handed the bottles round, and all drank out of the necks, and puffed dense volumes of smoke from their pipes, and spat on the carpet.

And still the birds sang in the clear air without, and still the ghylls rumbled, and still the light wind souched through the grass, and still the morning sunlight shone over all.

The door opened, and Hugh Ritson entered, followed by the lawyer, Mr. Bonniethorne. There was a steely glimmer in his

eyes as he stood just inside the threshold and looked round.

‘Come, get out of this,’ he said.

The men shuffled to their feet and were elbowing their way out. Drayton, who sat on the table, removed his pipe from between his teeth, and called on them to remain.

Hugh Ritson stepped up to Drayton and touched him on the shoulder.

‘I want to speak with you,’ he said.

‘What is it?’ demanded Drayton.

‘I want to speak with you,’ repeated Hugh.

‘What is it? Out with it. You’ve got the gift of the gab, hain’t ye? Don’t mind my friends.’

Hugh Ritson’s face whitened, and a cold smile passed over it.

‘Your time is near,’ he muttered, and turned on his heel.

As he stepped out of the noisome chamber, a loud hoarse laugh followed him. He drew a long breath.

‘Thank God, it will soon be over,’ he said. Bonnithorne was at his side.

‘Is it to be to-morrow?’ asked the lawyer.

‘To-morrow,’ said Hugh Ritson.

‘Have you told him?’

‘Tell him yourself, Bonnithorne. I can bear with the man no longer. I shall be doing something that I may repent.’

‘Have you apprised Parson Christian?’

Hugh Ritson bent his head.

‘And Greta?’

‘She won’t come,’ said Hugh. ‘The girl could never breathe the same air as that scoundrel for five minutes together.’

‘And yet he’s her half-brother,’ said the lawyer softly; and then he added with his conventional smile: ‘odd, isn’t it?’

CHAPTER II.

WHEN the procession of children had passed the little cottage at the angle of the roads, the old man who leaned on his staff at the gate turned about and stepped to the porch.

‘Did the boy see them?—did he see the children?’ said the young woman who held the child by the hand.

‘I mak’ na doot,’ said the old man.

He stooped to the little one and held out one long withered finger. The soft baby hand closed on it instantly.

‘Did he laugh? I thought he laughed,’ said the young woman.

A bright smile played on her lips.

‘Maybe so, lass.’

‘Ralphie has never seen the children before, father. Didn’t he look frightened—

just a little frightened—at first, you know? I thought he crept behind my gown.'

' Maybe, maybe.'

The little one had dropped the hand of his young mother, and, still holding the bony finger of his grandfather, he toddled beside him into the house.

Very cool and sweet was the kitchen, with whitewashed walls and hard earthen floor. A table and settle stood by the window, and a dresser that was an armoury of bright pewter dishes, trenchers, and piggins, crossed the opposite wall.

' Nay, but sista here, laal man,' said the old charcoal-burner, and he dived into a great pocket at his side.

' Have you brought it? Is it the kitten? Oh, dear, let the boy see it!'

A kitten came out of the old man's pocket, and was set down on the rug at the hearth. The timid creature sat dazed, then raised itself on its hind legs and mewed.

' Where's Ralphie? Is he watching it, father? What is he doing?'

The little one had dropped on hands and

knees before the kitten, and was gazing up into its face.

The mother leaned over him with a face that would have beamed with sunshine if the sun of sight had not been missing.

‘Is he looking? Doesn’t he want to coddle it?’

The little chap had pushed his nose close to the nose of the kitten, and was prattling to it in various inarticulate noises. ‘Boo—loo—lal-la—mama.’

‘Isn’t he a darling, father?’

‘It’s a winsome wee thing,’ said the old man, still standing, with drooping head, over the group on the hearth.

The mother’s face saddened, and she turned away. Then from the opposite side of the kitchen, where she was making pretence to take plates from a plate-rack, there came the sound of suppressed sobs. The old man’s eyes followed her.

‘Nay, lass; let’s have a sup of broth,’ he said, in a tone that carried another message.

The young woman put plates and a bowl of broth on the table.

‘To think that I can never see my own child, and everybody else can see him!’ she said, and then there was another bout of tears.

The charcoal-burner supped at his broth in silence. A glistening bead rolled slowly down his wizened cheek ; and the interview on the hearth went on without interruption : ‘Mew—mew—mew.’ ‘Boo—loo—lal-la—mama.’

There was a foot on the gravel in front.

‘How fend ye, Mattha?’ said a voice from without.

‘Come thy ways, Gubblum,’ answered the old man.

Gubblum Oglethorpe entered, dressed differently than of old. He wore a suit of canvas stained deeply with iron ore.

‘I’s thinking maybe Mercy will let me warm up my poddish,’ said Gubblum.

‘And welcome,’ said Mercy, and took down from the dresser a saucepan and porridge thivel. ‘I’ll make it for you while father sups his broth.’

‘Nay, lass, you’re as thrang as an auld

peat wife, I's warn. I'll mak' it myself. I's rather partic'lar about my poddish, forby. Dusta know how many faults poddish may have? They may be sour, sooty, sodden, and savvorless, soat, welsh, brocken, and lumpy—and that's mair nor enough, thoo knows.'

Gubblum had gone down on the hearth-rug.

'Why, and here's the son and heir,' he said. 'Nay, laddie, mind my claes—they'll dirty thy bran-new brat for thee.'

'Is he growing, Gubblum?'

'Growing?—amain.'

'And his eyes—are they changing colour?—going brown?'

'Maybe—I'll not be for saying nay.'

'Is he—is he *very* like me?'

'Nay—weel—nay—I's fancying I see summat of the stranger in the laal chap at whiles.'

The young mother turned her head. Gubblum twisted to where Matthew sat.

'That man and all his raggabash are

raking about this morning. It caps all, it does for sure.'

The old charcoal-burner did not answer. He paused with the spoon half-raised, glanced at Mercy, and then went on with his broth.

'Hasta heard of the lang yammer in the papers about yon matter?' said Gubblum.

'Nay,' said Matthew, 'I hears nowt of the papers.'

'He's like to hang a lang crag when *he* hears about it.'

'I mak' na doot,' said Matthew, showing no curiosity.

'It's my belief 'at the auld woman at Hendon is turning tail. You mind she was down last back end, and he wadn't have nowt to say to her.'

'Ey, I mind her,' said Matthew.

'Every dog has his day, and I reckon yon dog's day is nigh amaist done. And it wad have been a vast shorter on'y Mercy hadn't her eyes.'

'Ey, ey,' said Matthew quietly.

'If the lass had no'but been able to say,
"Yon man is Drayton, and yon as you've

got in prison is Ritson, and I saw the bad wark done, *that wad have settled it.*'

'Na doot,' said Matthew, his head in the bowl.

'They warn't for hearing *me*. When the parson took me up to Lunnon mair nor a twelvemonth agone, they sent us baith home with our tails atween our legs. "Bring us the young woman," they said ; "your evidence will stand aside hers, but not alone. Bring the young woman to 'dentify," they says. "She's gone blind," we says. "We can't help that," they says. And that's what they call justice up in Lunnon.'

'Ey, ey,' said Matthew.

'But then thoo has to mak' 'lowances for them gentry folk—they've never been larn't no better, thoo sees.'

Gubblum's porridge was bubbling, and the thivel worked vigorously. Matthew had picked up the child from the hearth. The little fellow was tugging at his white beard.

'It were bad luck that me and Mercy didn't stay a day or so langer in Hendon yon

time. She had her eyes then. But the lass was badly, and ' (dropping his voice) '*that* way, thoo knows, and I warn't to prophesy what was to happen to poor Paul Ritson. So I brought her straight away home.'

' So thoo did, Gubblum,' said Matthew, stroking the child's head.

' It's that Hugh as is at the bottom of it all, I reckon. I'm not afraid to say it if he *is* my master. I allus liked Paul Ritson—the reet one, thoo knows, not this taistrel that calls hisself Paul Ritson—but I cared so laal for Hugh that I could have taken him and wrowk't the fire with him.'

The porridge was ready, and Mercy set a wooden bowl on the table. ' I's fullen thy bicker, my lass,' said Gubblum. ' I's only a laal man, but I's got a girt appetite, thoo sees.' Then turning to Matthew he continued, ' But he's like to pay for it. He brought his raggabash here, and now the rascal has the upper hand—that's plain to see.'

' So it be,' said Matthew.

' Deemoralizin' all the country side, what

with his drinkin' and cockfighting and terriers, an *I* don't know what. Theer's Dick o' the Syke, he's a ruined man this day, and John, the blacksmith, he's never had a heat on the anvil for a week, and as for Job, the mason, he's shaping to be mair nor ever like his Bible namesake, for he won't have nowt but his dunghill to sit on soon.'

'Dusta think they dunnott ken he's the wrang man?' asked Matthew.

'Nay, Mattha, but a laal bit of money's a wonderful thing, mind ye.'

'It is for sure.'

'One day he went to clogger Kit to be measur't for new shoes. "What, Master Ritson," says Kit, "your foot's langer by three lines nor when I put the tape on it afore."'

'Ah!'

'Next day Kit had an order for two pairs, forby a pair of leggings and clogs for Natt. That's the way it's manish'd.'

Nannie had taken her child from her father's knee, and was sitting on the sconce bench with it, holding a broken piece of a

mirror before its face, and listening for its laugh when it saw itself in the glass.

‘But he’s none Cummerland—hearken to his tongue,’ said Matthew.

Gubblum put down his spoon on his plate, now empty.

‘That minds me,’ he said, laughing, ‘that I met him out one day all dressed in his brave claes—them as might do for a nigger that plays the banjo. “Off for a spogue?” I says. “What’s a *spogue*?” he says, looking thunder. “Nay,” I says, “you’re no’but a dalesman—ax folks up Hendon way,” I says. I was peddling then, but Master Hugh ’counters me another day, and he says, “Gubblum,” he says, “I’s wanting a smart laal man, same as you, to weigh the ore on the bank-top—pund a week,” he says.’

‘Ey, I mak’ na doot they thowt to buy thee ower,’ said Matthew.

‘They’ve made a gay canny blunder if they think they’ve put a swine-rung on Gubblum’s snout. Buy or beat—that’s the word. They’ve bought most of the folk

and made them as lazy as libbed bitches. But they warn't able to buy the Ritson's bitch itself.'

'What dusta mean, Gubblum?'

'What, man! thoo's heard how the taistrel killed poor auld Fan? No? Weel, thoo knows she was Paul Ritson's dog, Fan was; and when she saw this man coming up the lonnin, she frisk't and wag't her tail. But when she got close to him she found her mistake, and went slenken off. He made shift to coax her, but Fan wad none be coaxed; and folk were takin' stock. So what dusta think the taistrel does, but ups with a stone and brains her.'

'That's like him for sure,' said Matthew. 'But don't the folk see that his wife as it might be, Miss Greta, as was, won't have nowt to say to him?'

'Nay, they say that's no'but a rue-bargain, and she found out her mind after she wedded—that's all the clotheheads think about it.'

'Hark,' said Mercy, half rising from the sconce. 'It's Mrs. Ritson's foot.'

The men listened. ‘Nay, lass, there’s no foot,’ said Gubblum.

‘Yes, she’s on the road,’ said Mercy. Her face showed that pathetic tension of the other senses which is peculiar to the blind. A moment later Greta stepped into the cottage. The telegram which Brother Peter gave her at the church was still in her hand. ‘Good-morning, Matthew ; good-morning, Gubblum ; I have news for you, Mercy. The doctors are coming to-day.’

Mercy’s face fell perceptibly. The old man’s head drooped lower.

‘There, don’t be afraid,’ said Greta, touching her hand caressingly. ‘It will soon be over. The doctors didn’t hurt you before, did they ?’

‘No ; but this time it will be the operation,’ said Mercy. There was a tremor in her voice.

Greta had lifted the child from the sconce. The little fellow cooed close to her ear, and babbled his inarticulate nothings.

‘Only think, when it is all over you will

be able to see your darling Ralphie for the first time !'

Mercy's sightless face brightened. ' Oh, yes,' she said, ' and watch him play, and see him spin his tops and chase the butterflies. Oh, that will be very good !'

' Dusta say to-day, Mistress Ritson ?' asked Matthew, the big drops standing in his eyes.

' Yes, Matthew ; I will stay to see it over, and mind baby, and help a little.'

Mercy took the little one from Greta's arms and cried over it, and laughed over it, and then cried and laughed again. ' Mamma and Ralphie shall play together in the garden, darling, and Ralphie shall see the horses—and the flowers—and the birdies—and mamma—yes, mamma shall see *Ralphie*. Oh, Mrs. Ritson, how selfish I am—how can I ever repay you ?'

The tears were trickling down Greta's cheeks. ' It is I who am selfish, Mercy,' she said, and kissed the sightless orbs. ' Your dear eyes shall give me back my poor husband.'

CHAPTER III.

Two hours later the doctors arrived. They had called at the vicarage in driving up the valley, and Parson Christian was with them. They looked at Mercy's eyes, and were satisfied that the time was ripe for the operation. At the sound of their voices, Mercy trembled and turned livid. By a maternal instinct she picked up the child, who was toddling about the floor, and clasped it to her bosom. The little one opened wide his blue eyes at sight of the strangers, and the prattling tongue became quiet.

'Take her to her room, and let her lie on the bed,' said one of the doctors to Greta.

A sudden terror seized the young mother. 'No, no, no!' she said, in an indescribable

accent, and the child cried a little from the pressure to her breast.

‘Come, Mercy, dear, be brave for your darling’s sake,’ said Greta.

‘Listen to me,’ said the doctor, quietly but firmly. ‘You are now quite blind, and you have been in total darkness for a year and a half. We may be able to restore your sight by giving you a few minutes’ pain. Will you not bear it?’

Mercy sobbed, and kissed the child passionately.

‘Just think, it is quite certain that without an operation you will never regain your sight,’ continued the doctor. ‘You have nothing to lose, and everything to gain. Are you satisfied? Come, go away to your room quietly.’

‘Oh, oh, oh!’ sobbed Mercy.

‘Just imagine, only a few minutes’ pain, and even of that you will scarcely be conscious. Before you know what is doing, it will be done.’

Mercy clung closer to her child, and kissed it again and yet more fervently.

The doctors turned to each other. ‘Strange vanity!’ muttered the one who had not spoken before. ‘Her eyes are useless, and yet she is afraid she may lose them.’

Mercy’s quick ears caught the whispered words. ‘It is not that,’ she said passionately.

‘No, gentlemen,’ said Greta, ‘you have mistaken her thought. Tell her she runs no danger of her life.’

The doctors smiled and laughed a little. ‘Oh, that’s it, eh? Well, we can tell her that with certainty.’

Then there was another interchange of half-amused glances.

‘Ah, we that be men, sirs, don’t know the depth and tenderness of a mother’s heart,’ said Parson Christian. And Mercy turned towards him a face that was full of gratitude. Greta took the child out of her arms and hushed it to sleep in another room. Then she brought it back and put it in its cradle that stood in the ingle.

‘Come, Mercy,’ she said, ‘for the sake of

your boy.' And Mercy permitted herself to be led from the kitchen.

'So there will be no danger,' she said. 'I shall not leave my boy. Who said that? The doctor? Oh, good gracious, it's nothing. Only think, I shall live to see him grow to be a great lad.'

Her whole face was now radiant.

'It will be nothing. Oh, no, it will be nothing. How silly it was to think that he would live on, and grow up, and be a man, and I lie cold in the churchyard—and me his mother! That was very childish, wasn't it? But, then, I have been so childish since Ralphie came.'

'There, lie and be quiet, and it will soon be over,' said Greta.

'Let me kiss him first. Do let me kiss him. Only once. You know it's a great risk after all. And if he grew up—and I wasn't here—if—if—'

'There, dear Mercy, you must not cry again. It inflames your eyes, and that can't be good for the doctors.'

'No, no, I won't cry. You are very

good; everybody is very good. Only let me kiss my little Ralphie—just for the last.'

Greta led her back to the side of the cot, and she spread herself over it with outstretched arms, as the mother-bird poises with outstretched wings over her brood. Then she rose, and her face was peaceful and resigned.

The Laird Fisher sat down before the kitchen fire, with one arm on the cradle head. Parson Christian stood beside him. The old shepherd wept in silence, and the good Parson's voice was too thick for the words of comfort that rose to his lips.

The doctors followed into the bedroom. Mercy was lying tranquilly on her bed. Her countenance was without expression. She was busy with her own thoughts. Greta stood by the bedside; anxiety was written in every line of her beautiful, brave face.

'We must give her the gas,' said one of the doctors, addressing the other.

Mercy's features twitched.

‘Who said that?’ she asked nervously.

‘My child, you must be quiet,’ said the doctor in a tone of authority.

‘Yes, I will be quiet, very quiet; only don’t make me unconscious,’ she said.

‘Never mind me; I will not cry. No; if you hurt me I will not cry out. I will not stir. I will do everything you ask. And you shall say how quiet I have been. Only don’t let me be insensible.’

The doctors consulted together aside, and in whispers.

‘Who spoke about the gas? It wasn’t you, Mrs. Ritson, was it?’

‘You must do as the doctors wish, dear,’ said Greta in a caressing voice.

‘Oh, I will be very good. I will do every little thing. Yes, and I will be so brave. I am a little childish sometimes, but I *can* be brave, can’t I?’

The doctors returned to the bedside.

‘Very well, we will not use the gas,’ said one. ‘You are a brave little woman after all. There, be still—very still.’

One of the doctors was tearing linen into

strips for bandages, while the other fixed Mercy's head to suit the light.

There was a faint sound from the kitchen.
‘Wait,’ said Mercy. ‘That is father—he’s crying. Tell him not to cry. Say it’s nothing.’

She laughed a weak little laugh.

‘There, he will hear that ; go and say it was I who laughed.’

Greta left the room on tiptoe. Old Matthew was still sitting over a dying fire, gently rocking the sleeping child. Parson Christian’s eyes were raised in prayer.

When Greta returned to the bedroom, Mercy called her, and said, very softly—
‘Let me hold your hand, Greta—may I say Greta ?—there,’ and her fingers closed on Greta’s with a convulsive grasp.

The operation began. Mercy held her breath. She had the stubborn north-country blood in her. Once only a sigh escaped. There was a dead silence.

In two or three minutes the doctor said,
‘Just another minute, and all will be over.’

At the next instant, Greta felt her hand held with a grasp of iron.

'Doctor, doctor, I can see you,' cried Mercy, and her words came in gusts.

'Be quiet,' said the doctor in a stern voice. In half a minute more the linen bandages were being wrapped tightly over Mercy's eyes.

'Doctor, dear doctor, let me see my boy,' cried Mercy.

'Be quiet, I say,' said the doctor again.

'Dear doctor, my dear doctor, only one peep—one little peep—I saw your face—let me see my Ralphie's.'

'Not yet, it is not safe.'

'But only for a moment. Don't put the bandage on for one moment. Just think, doctor, I have never seen my boy; I've seen other people's children, but never once my own, own darling. Oh, dear doctor—'

'You are exciting yourself. Listen to me; if you don't behave yourself now you may never see your child.'

'Yes, yes, I will behave myself; I will be very good. Only don't shut me up in

darkness again until I see my boy. Greta, bring him to me. Listen, I hear his breathing. Go for my darling. The kind doctor won't be angry with you. Tell him that if I see my child it will cure me. I know it will.'

Greta's eyes were swimming in tears.

'Rest quiet, Mercy. Everything may be lost if you disturb yourself now, my dear.'

The doctors were wrapping bandage over bandage, and fixing them firmly at the back of their patient's head.

'Now listen again,' said one of them.
'This bandage must be kept over your eyes for a week.'

'A week—a whole week? Oh, doctor, you might as well say for ever.'

'I say a week. And if you should ever remove it—'

'Not for an instant? Not raise it a very little?'

'If you ever remove it for an instant, or raise it ever so little, you will assuredly lose your sight for ever. Remember that.'

'Oh, doctor, it is terrible. Why did you

not tell me so before? Oh, this is worse than blindness. Think of the temptation, and I have never seen my boy!'

The doctor had fixed the bandage, and his voice was less stern, but no less resolute.

' You must obey me,' he said; ' I will come again this day week, and then you shall see your child, and your father, and this young lady, and everybody. But, mind, if you don't obey me, you will never see anything. You will have one glance of your little boy, and then be blind for ever, or perhaps—yes, perhaps *die*.'

Mercy lay quiet for a moment. Then she said, in a low voice :

' Dear doctor, you must forgive me. I am very wilful, and I promised to be so good. I will not touch the bandage. No, for the sake of my little boy, I will never, never touch it. You shall come yourself and take it off, and then I shall see him.'

The doctors went away. Greta remained all that night in the cottage.

' You are happy now, Mercy?' said Greta.

' Oh yes,' said Mercy. ' Just think, only

a week! And he must be so beautiful by this time.'

When Greta took the child to her at sunset, there was an ineffable joy in her pale face, and next morning when Greta awoke, Mercy was singing softly to herself in the sunrise.

CHAPTER IV.

THERE was a gathering of miners near the pit-head that morning. It was pay-day. The rule was that the miners on the morning shift should pass through the pay-office before going down the shaft at eight o'clock; and that those on the night shift should pass through on their way home a few minutes afterwards. When the morning men passed through the office they had found the pay-door shut, and a notice posted over it, saying, 'All wages due at eight o'clock to-day will be paid at the same hour to-morrow.'

Presently the men on the night shift came up in the cages, and, after a brief explanation, both gangs, with the banksmen and all top-ground hands except the engine-man, trooped away to a place suitable for a con-

ference. There was a worked-out open cutting a hundred yards away. It was a vast cleft dug into the side of the mountain, square on its base, vertical in its three gray walls, and sweeping up to a dizzy height, over which the brant sides of the green fell rose sheer into the sky. It was to this natural theatre that the two hundred miners made their way in groups of threes and fours, their lamps and cans in their hands, their red-stained clothes glistening in the morning sun.

It was decided to send a deputation to the master, asking that the order might be revoked and payment made as usual. The body of the men remained in the clearing, conversing in knots, while two miners, buirdly fellows, rather gruffer of tongue than the rest, went to the office to act as spokesmen.

The deputation were approaching the pit-head when the engine-man shouted that he had just had the master's knock from below, and in another moment Hugh Ritson, in flannels and fustian, stepped out of the cage.

He heard the request, and at once offered to go to the men and give his answer. The miners made way for him respectfully, and then closed about him when he spoke.

‘Men,’ he said, with a touch of his old resolution, ‘let me tell you frankly as between man and man that I cannot pay you this morning, because I haven’t got the money. I tried to get it and failed. This afternoon I shall receive much more than is due to you, and to-morrow you shall be promptly paid.’

The miners twisted about and compared notes in subdued voices.

‘That’s no’but fair,’ said one.

‘He cannut say na fairer,’ said another.

But there were some who were not so easily appeased, and one of these crushed his way through the crowd and said:

‘Mister Ritson, we’re not same as the bettermer folk as can get credit for owt ’at they want. We ax six days’ pay because we have to do six days’ payin’ wi’ it. And if we’re back a day in our pay we’re a day back in our payin’; and that

means clemmin' a daal bit—and the wife and bairns forby.'

There were murmurs of approval from the crowd, and then another malcontent added:

'Times has changed to a gay tune sin' we could put by for a rainy day. It's hand to mouth now, on'y the mouth's allus ready and the hand's not.'

'It's na much as we ha' gotten to put away these times,' said the first speaker. 'Not same as the days when a pitman's wife, 'at I ken on, flung a five-pund note in his face and axed him what he thowt she were to mak' o' that.'

'Nay, nay,' responded the others in a chorus.

'Men, I'm not charging you with past extravagance,' said Hugh Ritson, 'and it's not my fault if the pit hasn't done as well for all of us as I had hoped.'

He was moving away, when the crowd closed about him again.

'Mates,' shouted one of the miners, 'there's another word as some on us wad like to say to the master, and that's about the timber.'

‘What is it?’ asked Hugh Ritson, facing about.

‘There be some on us ’at think the pit’s none ower safe down in the bottom working, where the seam of sand runs cross-ways. We’re auld miners, maistly, and we thowt maybe ye wadna tak’ it wrang if we telt ye ’at it wants a vast mair forks and upreets.’

‘Thank you, my lads, I’ll see what I can do,’ said Hugh Ritson; and then added in a lower tone, ‘but I’ve put a forest of timber under-ground already, and where this burying of money is to end God alone knows.’

He turned away this time and moved off, halting more noticeably than usual on his infirm foot.

He returned to his office near the pit-bank, and found Mr. Bonnithorne awaiting him.

‘The day is young, but I’m no sluggard, you know,’ said the lawyer. ‘I thought we might want a word or two before the meeting at the Ghyll.’

Hugh Ritson did not notice the explana-

tion. He looked anxious and disturbed. While stripping off his pit flannels, and putting on his ordinary clothes, he told Mr. Bonnithorne what had just occurred, and then added:

‘If anything had been necessary to prove that this morning’s bad business is inevitable, I should have found it in this encounter with the men.’

‘It comes as a fillip to your already blunted purpose,’ said the lawyer with a curious smile. ‘Odd, isn’t it?’

‘Blunted!’ said Hugh Ritson, and there was a perceptible elevation of the eyebrows.

Presently he drew a long breath, and said with an air of relief:

‘Ah, well, if *she* suffers who has suffered enough already, *he* at least will be out of the way for ever.’

Bonnithorne shifted slightly on his seat.

‘You think so?’ he asked.

Something cynical in the tone caught Hugh Ritson’s ear.

‘It was a bad change, wasn’t it?’ added

the lawyer ; ‘this one is likely to be a deal more troublesome.’

Hugh Ritson went on with his dressing in silence.

‘ You see, by the interchange your positions were reversed,’ continued the lawyer.

‘ What do you mean?’

‘ Well, not to put *too* fine a point on it, the *other* was in *your* hands, while *you* are in the hands of *this* one.’

Hugh Ritson’s foot fell heavily at that instant, but he merely said, with suppressed quietness :

‘ There was this one’s crime.’

‘ *Was*—precisely,’ said Mr. Bonnithorne.

Hugh Ritson glanced up with a look of inquiry.

‘ When you gave the crime to the *other*, this one became a free man,’ the lawyer explained.

There was a silence.

‘ What does it all come to?’ said Hugh Ritson sullenly.

‘ That your hold of Paul Drayton is gone for ever.’

‘How so?’

‘Because you can never incriminate him without first incriminating yourself,’ said the lawyer.

‘Who talks of incrimination?’ said Hugh Ritson testily. ‘To-day, this man is to take upon himself the name of Paul Lowther—his true name, though he doesn’t know it—blockhead as he is. Therefore, I ask again, What does it all come to?’

Mr. Bonnithorne shifted uneasily.

‘Nothing,’ he said meekly, but the curious smile still played about his downcast face. Then there was silence again.

‘Do you know that Mercy Fisher is likely to regain her sight?’ said Hugh.

‘You don’t say so? Dear me, dear me!’ said the lawyer, sincere at last. ‘In all the annals of jurisprudence there is no such extraordinary case of identity being conclusively provable by one witness only, and of that witness becoming blind. Odd, isn’t it?’

Hugh Ritson smiled coldly.

‘Odd? Say providential,’ he answered.

'I believe that's what you Church folk call it when the Almighty averts a disaster that is made imminent by your own shortsightedness.'

'A disaster indeed, if *her* sight ceases to be so providentially short,' said the lawyer.

'Get the man out of the way, and the woman is all right,' said Hugh. He picked a letter out of a drawer, and handed it to Mr. Bonnithorne. 'You will remember that the other was to have shipped to Australia.'

Mr. Bonnithorne bowed his head.

'This letter is from the man for whom he intended to go out—an old friend of my father's. Answer it, Bonnithorne.'

'In what terms?' asked the lawyer.

'Say that a long illness prevented, but that Paul Ritson is now prepared to fulfil his engagement.'

'And what then?'

'What then?' Hugh Ritson echoed.

'Why, what do you think?'

'Send *him*?' with a motion of the thumb over the shoulder.

‘Of course,’ said Hugh.

Again the cynical tone caught Hugh Ritson’s ear, and he glanced up quickly, but made no remark. He was now dressed.

‘I’m ready,’ he said, and on reaching the door and taking a last look round the room he added, ‘I’ll have the best of this furniture removed to the Ghyll to-morrow. The house has been unbearable of late, and I’ve been forced to spend most of my time down here.’

‘Then you don’t intend to give him much grace?’ asked Bonnithorne.

‘Not an hour.’

The lawyer bent his forehead very low at that moment.

CHAPTER V.

THE sun was high over the head of Hind-scarth, but a fresh breeze was blowing from the north, and the walk to the Ghyll was bracing. Mr. Bonnithorne talked little on the way, but Hugh Ritson's spirits rose sensibly, and he chatted cheerfully on indifferent subjects. It was still some minutes short of nine o'clock when they reached the house. The servants were bustling about in clean aprons and caps.

'Have the gentlemen arrived?' asked Hugh.

'Not yet, sir,' answered one of the servants—it was old Dinah Wilson.

The two men stepped up to Hugh Ritson's room. There the table was spread

for breakfast. The lawyer glanced at the chairs and said :

‘Then you have invited other friends?’

Hugh nodded his head, and sat down at the organ.

‘Three or four neighbours of substance,’ he said, opening the case. ‘In a matter like this it is well to have witnesses.’

Bonnithorne replied with phlegm :

‘But what about the feelings of the man who is so soon to be turned out of the house?’

Hugh Ritson’s fingers were on the keys. He paused and faced about.

‘I had no conception that you had such a delicate sense of humour, Bonnithorne,’ he said, with only the shadow of a smile. ‘Feelings! *His* feelings!’

There was a swift glide up the notes, and other sounds were lost. The window was half-open; the lawyer walked to it and looked out. At that moment the two men were back to back. Hugh Ritson’s head was bent over the keyboard. Mr. Bonnithorne’s eyes were on the tranquil landscape

lying in the sun outside. The faces of both wore curious smiles.

Hugh Ritson leapt from his seat.

‘Ah, I feel like another man already,’ he said, and took a step or two up and down the room, his infirm foot betraying no infirmity. There was the noise of fresh arrivals in the hall. A minute later a servant entered, followed by three gentlemen, who shook hands effusively with Hugh Ritson.

‘Delighted to be of service, I’m sure,’ said one.

‘Glad the unhappy connection is to be concluded—it was a scandal,’ said the other.

‘You could not go on living on such terms—life wasn’t worth it, you know,’ said the first.

The third gentleman was more restrained, but Hugh paid him marked deference. They had a short, muttered conference apart.

‘Get the other mortgages wiped off the deeds and I have no objection to lend you the money on the security of the house and lands,’ said the gentleman. At that remark

Hugh Ritson bowed his head and appeared satisfied.

He rang for breakfast.

'Ask Mr. Paul if he is ready,' he said when Dinah brought the tray.

'Master Paul is a-bed, sir,' said Dinah; and then she added for herself, 'It caps all —sec feckless wark. It dudn't use to be so for sure. I'll not say but a man *may* be that changed in a twelvemonth——'

'Ah, I'll go to him myself,' said Hugh, and begging to be excused, he left the room.

Mr. Bonnithorne followed him to the other side of the door.

'Have you counted the cost?' he asked.
'It will be a public scandal.'

Hugh smiled, and answered with composure :

'Whose will be the loss?
'God knows!' said the lawyer, with sudden energy.

Hugh glanced up quickly. There was the murmur of voices from within the room they had just left.

'Is it that you are too jealous of your

good name to allow it to be bruited abroad in a scandal, as you say ?'

Mr. Bonnithorne's face wore a curious expression at that moment.

' It's not *my* good name that is in question,' he said quietly, and turned back to the door.

' Whose then? His ?'

But the lawyer already held the door ajar, and was passing into the room.

Hugh Ritson made his way to the bedroom occupied by Paul Drayton. He opened the door without knocking. It was dark within. Thin streaks of dusty sunlight shot from between a pair of heavy curtains. The air was noisome with dead tobacco smoke and the fumes of stale beer. Hugh's gorge rose, but he conquered his disgust.

' Who's there ?' said a husky voice from behind the dark hangings of a four-post bed that was all but hidden in the gloom.

' The friends are here,' said Hugh Ritson cheerily. ' How long will you be ?'

There was a suppressed chuckle.

‘All right.’

‘We will begin breakfast,’ said Hugh. He was turning to go.

‘Is that lawyer man back from Scotland?’ asked Drayton.

‘Bonnithorne? He’s here—he didn’t say that he’d been away,’ said Hugh.

‘All right.’

Hugh Ritson returned to the bed-head. ‘Have you heard,’ he said in a subdued voice, ‘that the doctors have operated on the girl Mercy, and that she is likely to regain her sight?’

‘Eh? What?’ Drayton had started up in bed. Then rolling down his sleeves and buttoning them leisurely, he added, ‘But that ain’t nothing to me.’

Hugh Ritson left the room. He was in spirits indeed, for he had borne even this encounter with equanimity. As he passed through the house, Brother Peter entered at the porch with a letter in his hand.

‘Is Parson Christian coming?’ said Hugh.

‘Don’t know ’at I’ve heeard,’ said Peter.

‘ He’s boddered me to fetch ye a scribe of a line. Here ’tis.’

Hugh Ritson opened the envelope. The note ran :—

‘ I cannot reconcile it to my conscience to break bread with one who has broken the peace of my household ; nor is it agreeable to my duty as a minister of Christ to give the countenance of my presence to proceedings which must be a sham, inasmuch as the person concerned is an impostor—with the which name I yet hope to brand him when the proper time and circumstances arrive.’

Hugh smiled as he read the letter ; then thrust a shilling into Peter’s unyielding hand, and shot away.

‘ The parson will not come,’ said Hugh, drawing Bonnithorne aside ; ‘ but that cannot matter. If he is Greta’s guardian, you are her father’s executor.’ Then, raising his voice, ‘ Gentlemen,’ he said, ‘ my brother wishes us to begin breakfast ; he will join us presently.’

The company was soon seated ; the talk was brisk and cheerful.

‘Glorious prospect,’ said a gentleman sitting opposite the open window. ‘Often wonder you don’t throw out a bay, Mr. Ritson.’

‘I’ve thought of it,’ said Hugh, ‘but it’s not worth while to spend such money until one is master of one’s own house.’

‘Ah, true, true !’ said several voices in chorus.

Drayton entered, his eyes red, his face sallow. ‘Morning, gents,’ he said, in his thick guttural.

Two of the gentlemen rose and bowed with frigid politeness. ‘Good-morning, Mr. Ritson,’ said the third.

The servant had followed Drayton into the room with a beefsteak, underdone. ‘Post not come?’ he asked, shifting his plates.

‘It can’t be long now,’ said Bonnithorne, consulting his watch.

‘Sooner the better,’ Drayton muttered. He took some papers from a breast-pocket

and counted them; then fixed them in his waistcoat where his watch would have been if he had worn one.

When breakfast was done, Hugh Ritson took certain documents from a cabinet. ‘Be seated, gentlemen,’ he said. All sat except Drayton, who lit a pipe, and rang to ask if the postman had come. He had not. ‘Then go and sharpen up his heels.’

‘My duty would be less pleasant,’ said Hugh Ritson, ‘if some of the facts were not already known.’

‘Then we’ll take ’em as read; so we will,’ put in Drayton, perambulating behind a cloud of smoke.

‘Paul, I will ask you to be seated,’ said Hugh, in an altered tone.

Drayton sat down with a snort.

‘I have to tell you,’ continued Hugh Ritson, ‘that my brother, known to you as Paul Ritson, is now satisfied that he was not the heir of my father, who died intestate.’

There were sundry nods of the grave noddles assembled about the table.

‘Fearful shock to any man,’ said one.
‘No wonder he has lost heart and grown
reckless,’ said another.

‘On becoming aware of this fact he was
anxious to relinquish the estate to the true
heir.’

There were further nods, and some mut-
tered comments on the requirements of
honour.

‘I show you here a copy of the register
of my father’s marriage, and a copy of the
register of my own birth, occurring less
than a year afterwards. From these, in the
absence of extraordinary testimony, it must
be the presumption that I am myself my
father’s rightful heir.’

The papers were handed about and re-
turned with evident satisfaction.

‘So far, all is plain,’ continued Hugh
Ritson. ‘But my brother has learned that
he is not even my father’s son.’

Three astonished faces were lifted from
the table. Bonnithorne sat with head bent.
Drayton leaned an elbow on one knee and
smoked sullenly.

‘It turns out that he is the son of my mother by another man,’ said Hugh Ritson.

The guests twisted about. ‘Ah, that explains all,’ they whispered.

‘You will be surprised to learn that my mother’s husband by a former invalid marriage was no other than Robert Lowther, and that he who sits with us now as Paul Ritson is really Paul Lowther.’

At this, Hugh placed two further documents on the table.

Drayton cleared his throat noisily.

‘Dear me, dear me, yet it’s plain enough!’ said one of the visitors.

‘Then what about Mrs. Ritson—Miss Greta, I mean?’ asked another.

‘She is Paul Lowther’s half-sister, and therefore his marriage with her must be annulled.’

The three gentlemen turned in their seats and looked amazed. Drayton still smoked in silence. Bonnithorne did not raise his head.

‘He will relinquish to me my father’s estates, but he is not left penniless,’ con-

tinued Hugh Ritson. ‘By his own father’s will he inherits five thousand pounds.’

Drayton snorted contemptuously ; then spat on the floor.

‘Friends,’ said Hugh Ritson again, ‘there is only one further point, and I am loath to touch on it. My brother—I speak of Paul Lowther—on taking possession of the estates, exercised what he believed to be his legal right to mortgage them. I am sorry to say that he mortgaged them deeply.’

There was an interchange of astute glances.

‘If I were a rich man, I should be content to be the loser, but I am a poor man, and am compelled to ask that those mortgages stand forfeit.’

‘Is it the law?’

‘It is—and, as you will say, only a fair one,’ Hugh answered.

‘Who are the mortgagees?’

‘That is where the pity arises—the chief of them is no other than the daughter of Robert Lowther—Greta.’

Sundry further twists and turns. ‘Pity

for her.' 'Well, she should have seen to his title. Who was her lawyer?'

'Her father's executor, our friend Mr. Bonnithorne.'

'How much does she lose?'

'I'm afraid a great deal—perhaps half her fortune,' said Hugh.

'No matter; it's but fair. Mr. Ritson is not to inherit an estate impoverished by the excesses of the wrong man.'

Drayton's head was still bent, but he scraped his feet restlessly.

'I have only another word to say,' said Hugh. 'In affairs of this solemn nature it is best to have witnesses, or perhaps I should have preferred to confer with Paul and Mr. Bonnithorne in private.' He dropped his voice and added, 'You see, there is my poor mother; and though, in a sense, she is no longer of this world, her good name must ever be sacred with me.'

The astute glances again, and two pairs of upraised hands. The lawyer had twisted towards the window.

'But our friend Bonnithorne will tell you

that the law in effect compelled me to evict my brother. You may not know that there is a condition of English law in which a bastard becomes a permanent heir; that is when he is called, in the language of the law, the bastard eigne.' There was a tremor in his voice as he added, softly, 'Believe me, I had no choice.'

Drayton stamped his heavy foot, threw down his pipe, and jumped to his feet. 'It's a lie, the lot of it,' he blurted. Then he fumbled at his watch-pocket, and pulled out a paper. 'That's my register, straight and plain.'

He stammered it aloud—

'Ritson, Paul; father, Allan Ritson; mother, Grace Ritson. Date of birth, April 6, 1847; place, Crieff, Scotland.'

Hugh Ritson, a little pale, smiled. The others turned to him in their amazement. In an instant he had regained an appearance of indifference.

'Where does it come from?' he asked.

'The Registrar's at Edinburgh. D'ye say it ain't right?'

'No ; but I say what is it worth? Gentlemen,' said Hugh, turning to the visitors, 'compare it with the register of my father's marriage. Observe, the one date is April 6, 1847; the other is June 12, 1847. Even if genuine, does it prove legitimacy?'

Drayton laid his hand on the lawyer's arm. 'Here, you, speak up, will ye?' he said.

Mr. Bonnithorne rose, and then Hugh Ritson's pale face became ghastly.

'This birth occurred in Scotland,' he said. 'Now, if the father happened to hold a Scotch domicile, and the mother lived with him as his wife, the child would be legitimate.'

'Without a marriage?'

'Without a ceremony.'

Natt pushed into the room, his cap in one hand, a letter in the other. He had knocked twice, and none had heard. 'The post, sir; one letter for Master Paul.'

'Good lad.' Drayton clutched it with a cry of delight.

'But my father had no Scotch domicile,' said Hugh, with apparent composure.

'Oh, but he had,' said Drayton, tearing open his envelope.

'He was a Scotsman born,' said Bonnithorne, taking another document from Drayton's hand. 'See, this is his register. Odd, isn't it?'

Hugh Ritson's eyes flashed. He looked steadily into the face of the lawyer; then he took the paper.

The next moment he crushed it in his palm and flung it out of the window. 'I shall want proof both of your facts and your law,' he said.

'Eh, and welcome,' said Drayton, shouting in his agitation. 'Listen to this,' and he proceeded to read.

'Wait! From whom?' asked Hugh Ritson. 'Some pettifogger?'

'The Solicitor-General,' said Bonnithorne.

'Is that good enough?' asked Drayton tauntingly.

'Go on,' said Hugh, rapping the table with his finger-tips.

Drayton handed the letter to the lawyer.

'Do you read it,' he said; 'I ain't flowery. I'm a gentleman, and——' He stopped suddenly and tramped the floor, while Bonnithorne read :

'If there is no reason to suppose that the father lost his Scotch domicile, the son is legitimate. If the husband recognised his wife in registering his son's birth, the law of Scotland would presume that there was a marriage, but whether of ceremony or consent would be quite indifferent.'

There was a pause. Drayton took the letter from the lawyer's hands, folded it carefully, and put it in his fob-pocket. Then he peered into Hugh Ritson's face with a leer of triumph. Bonnithorne had slunk aside. The guests were silent.

'D'ye hear?' said Drayton, '*the son is legitimate.*' He gloated over the words, and tapped his pocket as he repeated them. 'What d'ye say to it, eh?'

At first Hugh Ritson struggled visibly for composure, and in an instant his face was like marble. Drayton came close to him.

' You were going to give me the go-by, eh? Turn me out o' doors, eh? Damme, it's my turn now, so it is.'

So saying, Drayton stepped to the door and flung it open.

' This house is mine,' he said ; ' go, and be damned to you.'

At this unexpected blow, Hugh Ritson beat the ground with his foot. He looked round at the strangers, and felt like a wretch who was gagged and might say nothing. Then he halted to where Drayton stood with outstretched arm.

' Let me have a word with you in private,' he said, in a voice that was scarcely audible.

Drayton lifted his hand, and his fist was clenched.

' Not a syllable,' he said. His accent was brutal and frenzied.

Hugh Ritson's nostrils quivered, and his eyes flashed. Drayton quailed an instant, and burst into a laugh.

There was a great silence. Bonnithorne was still before the window, his face down, his hands clasped behind him, his foot paw-

ing the ground. Hugh Ritson walked to his side. He contemplated him a moment, and then touched him on the shoulder. When he spoke, his face was dilated with passion, and his voice was low and deep.

‘There is a Book,’ he said, ‘that a Churchman may know, which tells of an unjust steward. The master thought to dismiss him from his stewardship. Then the steward said within himself, “What shall I do?”’

There was a pause.

‘What *did* he do?’ continued Hugh Ritson, and every word fell on the silence like the stroke of a bell. ‘He called his master’s debtors together, and said to the first, “How much do you owe?” “One hundred measures.” Then he said, “Write a bill for fifty.”’

There was another pause.

‘What did that steward mean? He meant that when the master should dismiss him from his stewardship, the debtor should take him into his house.’

Hugh Ritson’s manner was the white

heat of calm. He turned half-round to where Drayton stood, and raised his voice.

‘ That debtor was henceforth bound hand and foot. Let him but parley with the steward, and the steward cried, “ Thief,” “ Forger,” “ Perjurer.” ’

Bonnithorne shuffled uneasily. He opened his mouth as if to speak, but the words would not come. At last he gulped down something that had seemed to choke him, smiled between his teeth a weak bankrupt smile, and said :

‘ How are we to read your parable ? Are you the debtor bound hand and foot, and is your brother the astute steward ? ’

Hugh Ritson’s foot fell heavily.

‘ Is it so ? ’ he said, catching at the word. ‘ Then be it so ; ’ and his voice rose to a shrill cry. ‘ That steward shall come to the ground, and his master with him.’

At that he stepped back to where Drayton stood with eyes as full of bewilderment as frenzy.

‘ Paul Lowther——’ he said.

‘Call me Paul Ritson,’ interrupted Drayton.

‘Paul Lowther——’

‘Ritson,’ Drayton shouted, and then, dropping his voice, he said rapidly, ‘You gave it me, and by God I’ll keep it!’

Hugh Ritson leaned across the table and tapped a paper that lay on it.

‘*That* is your name,’ he said, ‘and I’ll prove it.’

Drayton burst into another laugh.

‘You daren’t try,’ he chuckled.

Hugh turned upon him with eyes of fire.

‘So you measure my spirit by your own. Man, man!’ he said, ‘do you know what you are doing?’

There was another brutal laugh from Drayton, but it died suddenly on his lips.

Then Hugh Ritson stepped to the door. He took a last look round. It was as if he knew that he had reached the beginning of the end—as if he realized that he was never again to stand in the familiar room. The future, that seemed so near an hour ago, was gone from him for ever ; the cup that

he had lifted to his lips lay in fragments at his feet. He saw it all in that swift instant. On his face there were the lines of agony, but over them there played the smile of resolve. He put one hand to his forehead, and then said, in a voice so low as to be no more than a whisper :

‘Wait and see.’

When the guests, who stood huddled together like sheep in a storm, had recovered their stunned senses, Hugh Ritson was gone from the room. Drayton had sunk into a chair near where Bonnithorne stood, and was whining like a whipped hound.

‘Go after him. What will he do ? You know I was always against it.’

But presently he stood up and laughed, and bantered and crowed, and observed that it was a pity if a gentleman could not be master in his own house, and that what couldn’t be cured must be endured.

‘Precisely,’ interposed one of the guests, ‘and you have my entire sympathy, Mr. Ritson. A more cruel deception was never more manfully exposed.’

'I fully agree with you, neighbour,' said another, 'and such moral tyranny is fearful to contemplate. Paul Lowther, indeed ! Now, that *is* a joke.'

'Well, it *is* rather, ain't it ?' said Drayton. And then he laughed, and they all laughed and shook hands, and were excellent good friends.

CHAPTER VI.

GRETA stayed with Mercy until noon that day, begging, entreating, and finally commanding her to lie quiet in bed, while she herself dressed and fed the child, and cooked and cleaned, in spite of the Laird Fisher's protestations. When all was done, and the old charcoal-burner had gone out on the hills, Greta picked up the little fellow in her arms and went to Mercy's room. Mercy was alert to every sound, and in an instant was sitting up in bed. Her face beamed, her parted lips smiled, her delicate fingers plucked nervously at the counterpane.

‘How brightsome it is to-day, Greta,’ she said. ‘I’m sure the sun must be shining.’

The window was open, and a soft breeze

floated through the sun's rays into the room. Mercy inclined her head aside, and added, 'Ah, you young rogue, you ; you are there, are you ? Give him to me, the rascal.' The rogue was set down in his mother's arms, and she proceeded to punish his rascality with a shower of kisses. 'How bonny his cheeks must be ; they will be just like two ripe apples,' and forthwith there fell another shower of kisses. Then she babbled over the little one, and lisped, and stammered and nodded her head in his face, and blew little puffs of breath into his hair, and tickled him until he laughed and crowed and rolled and threw up his legs ; and then she kissed his limbs and extremities in a way that mothers have, and finally imprisoned one of his feet by putting it ankle-deep into her mouth. 'Would you ever think a foot could be so tiny, Greta ?' she said. And the little one plunged about and clambered laboriously up its mother's breast, and more than once plucked at the white bandage about her head. 'No, no, Ralphie must not touch,' said Mercy with sudden

gravity. ‘Only think, Ralphie pet, one week—only one—nay, less—only six days now, and then—oh, then——!’ A long hug, and the little fellow’s boisterous protest against the convulsive pressure abridged the mother’s prophecy.

All at once Mercy’s manner changed. She turned towards Greta, and said, ‘I will not touch the bandage, no, never ; but if Ralphie tugged at it, and it fell—would that be breaking my promise ?’

Greta saw what was in her heart.

‘ I’m afraid it would, dear,’ she said, but there was a tremor in her voice.

Mercy sighed audibly.

‘ Just think, it would be only Ralphie. The kind doctors could not be angry with my little child. I would say, “It was the boy,” and they would smile and say, “Ah, that is different.” ’

‘ Give me the little one,’ said Greta with emotion.

Mercy drew the child closer, and there was a pause.

‘ I was very wrong, Greta,’ she said in a

low tone. ‘Oh! you would not think what a fearful thing came into my mind a minute ago. Take my Ralphie. Just imagine, my own innocent baby tempted me.’

As Greta reached across the bed to lift the child out of his mother’s lap, the little fellow was struggling to communicate, by help of a limited vocabulary, some wondrous intelligence of recent events that somewhat overshadowed his little existence. ‘Puss—dat,’ many times repeated, was further explained by one chubby forefinger with its diminutive finger-nail pointed to the fat back of the other hand.

‘He means that the little cat has scratched him,’ said Greta, ‘but bless the mite, he is pointing to the wrong hand.’

‘Puss—dat,’ continued the child, and peered up into his mother’s sightless face. Mercy was all tears in an instant. She had borne yesterday’s operation without a groan, but now the scratch on her child’s hand went to her heart like a stab.

‘Lie quiet, Mercy,’ said Greta; ‘it will be gone to-morrow.’

‘Go-on,’ echoed the little chap, and pointed out at the window.

‘The darling, how he picks up every word!’ said Greta.

‘He means the horse,’ explained Mercy.

‘Go-on—man—go-on,’ prattled the little one, with a child’s indifference to all conversation except his own.

‘Bless the love, he must remember the doctor and his horse,’ said Greta.

Mercy was putting her lips to the scratch on the little hand.

‘Oh, Greta, I am very childish; but a mother’s heart melts like butter.’

‘Batter,’ echoed the child, and wriggled out of Greta’s arms to the ground, where he forthwith clambered on to the stool, and possessed himself of a slice of bread which lay on the table at the bedside. Then the fair curly head disappeared like a glint of sunlight through the door to the kitchen.

‘What shall I care if other mothers see my child? I shall see him too,’ said Mercy, and she sighed. ‘Yes,’ she added softly,

‘his hands and his eyes and his feet and his soft hair.’

‘Try to sleep an hour or two, dear,’ said Greta, ‘and then perhaps you may get up this afternoon—only *perhaps*, you know, but we’ll see.’

‘Yes, Greta, yes. How kind you are.’

‘You will be far kinder to me some day,’ said Greta very tenderly.

‘No—ah yes, I remember. How very selfish I am—I had quite forgotten. But then it is so hard not to be selfish when you are a mother. Only fancy, I never think of myself as Mercy now. No, never. I’m just Ralphie’s mamma. When Ralphie came, Mercy must have died in some way. That’s very silly, isn’t it? Only it does seem true.’

‘Man—go-on—batter,’ was heard from the kitchen, mingled with the patter of tiny feet.

‘Listen to him. How tricksome he is! And you should hear him cry, “Oh!” You would say, “That child has had an eye knocked out.” And then, in a minute, be-

hold, he's laughing once more. There, I'm selfish again ; but I will make up for it some day, if God is good.'

' Yes, Mercy, He *is* good,' said Greta.

Her arm rested on the door-jamb, and her head dropped on to it ; her eyes swam. Did it seem at that moment as if God had been very good to these two women ?

' Greta,' said Mercy, and her voice fell to a whisper, ' do you think Ralphie is like—anybody ?'

' Yes, dear, he is like you.'

There was a pause. Then Mercy's hand strayed from under the bedclothes and plucked at Greta's gown.

' Do you think,' she asked, in a voice all but inaudible, ' that father knows who it is ?'

' I cannot say—*we* have never told him.'

' Nor I—he never asked, never once—only, you know, he gave up his work at the mine, and went back to the charcoal-pit when Ralphie came. But he never said a word.'

Greta did not answer. There was another

pause. Then Mercy said, in a stronger voice, ‘Will it be soon—the trial?’

‘As soon as your eyes are better,’ said Greta earnestly; ‘everything depends on your recovery.’

At that moment the bedroom door was pushed open with a little lordly bang, and the great wee man entered with his piece of bread stuck rather insecurely on one prong of a fork.

‘Toas,’ he explained complacently, ‘toas,’ and walked up to the empty grate and stretched his arm over the fender at the cold bars.

‘Why, there’s no fire for toast, you darling goose,’ said Greta, catching him in her arms, much to his masculine vexation.

Mercy had risen on an elbow, and her face was full of the yearning of the blind. Then she lay back.

‘Never mind,’ she said to herself in a faltering voice, ‘let me lie quiet and *think* of all his pretty ways.’

CHAPTER VII.

GRETA returned to the Vicarage towards noon, and overtook Parson Christian and Peter in the Ionnin, the one carrying a scythe over his shoulder, the other a bundle of rushes under his one arm. The Parson was walking in silence under the noontide sun, his straw hat tipped back from his forehead and his eyes on the ground. He was busy with his own reflections. It was not until Greta had tripped up to his side and slipped his scythe-stone from its strap in the pole that the parson was awakened from his reverie.

‘Great news, Greta; great news, my lass,’ he said in answer to her liberal tender in exchange for his thoughts. ‘How well it’s said, that he that diggeth a pit for another

should look that he fall not into it himself.'

'What news, Mr. Christian?' said Greta, and her colour heightened.

'Well, we've been mowing the grass in the churchyard, Peter and I, and the scythe is old like ourselves, and it wanted tempering. So away we went to the smithy to have it ground, and who should come up but Robbie Atkinson, leading hassocks from Longridge. And Robbie would fain have us go with him and be cheerful at the Flying Horse. Well, we'd each had a pot of ale and milk when in came Natt, the stableman at Ritson's, all lather like one of his horses after his master has been astride her. And Natt was full of a great quarrel at the Ghyll, wherein young Mr. Hugh had tried to turn yonder man out of the house in the way I told you of before, but the man denied that he was what Hugh called him, and clung to it that he was Paul Ritson, and brought documents to show that Paul was his father's rightful heir after all.'

'Well, well?' asked Greta breathlessly.

Peter had shambled on to the house.

'Well, Natt is no very trustworthy chronicler, I fear, but one thing is plain, and that is, that Mr. Hugh, who thought to turn yon man out of the house, has been turned out of it himself.'

Greta stood in the road, trembling from head to foot.

'My poor husband!' she said, in a whisper. Then came a torrent of questions. 'When did this happen? What think you will come of it? Where will Mr. Hugh go? What will he do? Ah, Mr. Christian, you always said the cruel instrument would turn in his hand.'

There was a step behind them. In their anxiety they had not noticed it until it was close at their heels. They turned, and were face to face with Mr. Bonnithorne.

The lawyer bowed low and smiled, but before they had exchanged the courtesies of welcome, a horse's tramp came from the road, and in a moment Drayton rode up the lonnin. His face was flushed, and his

manner noisy as he leapt from the saddle into their midst.

Greta lifted one hand to her breast, and with the other hand she clasped that of the Parson. The old man's face grew rigid in an instant, and all the mellowness natural to it died away.

'Here, you, leave it to me,' said Drayton to the lawyer.

Mr. Bonnithorne's compressed lips betrayed vexation as he swung half aside. Drayton made up to Greta and the Parson with an air of braggadocio.

'I've come to tell you once for all that my wife must live under my roof.'

No one answered. Drayton took a step near, and slapped his boot with his riding-whip.

'The law backs me up in it, and I mean to have it out.'

Still there was no answer, and Drayton's braggadocio gathered assurance from the silence.

'Not as I want her. None of your shrinking away, madam.' A hoarse laugh.

‘Burn my body, if I wouldn’t as soon have my mother for a wife.’

‘What then?’ said the Parson in a low tone.

‘Appearances. I ain’t to be a laughing-stock of the neighbourhood any longer. My wife’s my wife. A husband’s a husband, and wants obedience.’

‘And what if you do not get it?’ asked the Parson, his old face whitening.

‘What? Imprisonment—that’s what.’ Drayton twisted about and touched the lawyer with the handle of his whip. ‘Here, you, tell ’em what’s what.’

Thus appealed to Mr. Bonnithorne explained that a husband was entitled to the restitution of connubial rights, and, in default, to the ‘attachment’ of his spouse.

‘The law,’ said Mr. Bonnithorne, ‘can compel a wife to live with her husband, or punish her with imprisonment for not doing so. Odd, isn’t it?’

‘D’ye hear?’ said Drayton, slapping furiously at the sole of his boot. ‘Punish her with imprisonment.’

There was a pause, and then the Parson said, quietly but firmly:

‘I gather that it means that you want to share this lady’s property.’

‘Well, what of it? Hain’t I a right to share it, eh?’

‘You have thus far enjoyed the benefit of her mortgages, on the pretence that you are her husband; but now you are going too far.’

‘We’ll see. Here, you,’ prodding the lawyer, ‘take proceedings at once. If she won’t come, imprison her. D’ye hear—imprison her.’

He swung about and caught the reins from the horse’s mane, laughing a hollow laugh. Greta disengaged her hand from the hand of the Parson, and stepped up to Drayton until she stood before him face to face, her eyes flashing, her lips quivering, her cheeks pale, her whole figure erect and firm.

‘And what of that?’ she said. ‘Do you think to frighten me with the cruelties of the law?—me?—me?’ she echoed, with

scorn in every syllable. ‘Have I suffered so little from it already that you dare to say, “Imprison her,” as if that would drive me to your house?’

Drayton tried to laugh, but the feeble effort died on his hot lips. He spat on the ground, and then tried to lift his eyes back to the eyes of Greta, but they fell to the whip that he held in his hand.

‘Imprison me, Paul Drayton; I shall not be the first you’ve imprisoned. Imprison me, and I shall be rid of you and your imposture,’ she said, raising her voice.

Drayton leapt to the saddle.

‘Damme, but I’ll do it,’ he muttered; and now, pale, crushed, his braggadocio gone, he tugged his horse’s head aside and brought down the whip on its flank.

Parson Christian turned to Mr. Bonniethorne.

‘Follow him,’ he said resolutely, and lifted his hand.

The lawyer made a show of explanation, then assumed an air of authority, but finally encountered the Parson’s white face,

and slunk away and disappeared down the lonnin, the long tails of his frock-coat dangling behind his legs.

In another moment Greta was hanging on Parson Christian's neck, sobbing and moaning, while the good old Christian, with all the mellowness back in his wrinkled face, smoothed her hair as tenderly as a woman.

'My poor Paul, my dear, dear husband!' cried Greta.

'Ah, thanks be to God, things are at their worst now, and they can't move but they must mend,' said the Parson.

He took her indoors and bathed her hot forehead, and dried with his hard old hand the tears that fell from eyes that a moment before had flashed like a basilisk's.

Towards five o'clock that evening a knock came to the door of the Vicarage, and old Laird Fisher entered. His manner was more than usually solemn and constrained.

'I's coom't to say as ma lass's wee thing is taken badly,' he said, 'and rayder sudden't.'

Greta rose from her seat and put on her hat and cloak. She was hastening down the road while the charcoal-burner was still standing in the middle of the floor.

CHAPTER VIII.

WHEN Greta reached the old charcoal-burner's cottage, the little one was lying in a drowsy state in Mercy's arms. Its breathing seemed difficult; sometimes it started in terror; it was feverish and suffered thirst. The mother's wistful face was bent down on it with an indescribable expression. There were only the trembling lips to tell of the sharp struggle that was going on within. But the yearning for sight of the little flushed countenance, the tearless appeal for but one glimpse of the drowsy little eyes, the half-articulate cry of a mother's heart against the fate that made the child she had suckled at her breast a stranger, whose very features she might not know—all this was written in that blind face.

‘Is he pale?’ said Mercy. ‘Is he sleeping? He does not talk now, but only starts and cries, and sometimes coughs.’

‘When did this begin?’ asked Greta.

‘Towards four o’clock. He had been playing, and I noticed that he breathed heavily, and then he came to me to be nursed. Is he awake now? Listen.’

The little one in its restless drowsiness was muttering faintly, ‘Man—go-on—batter—toas.’

‘The darling is talking in his sleep, isn’t he?’ said Mercy.

Then there was a ringing, brassy cough.

‘It is croup,’ thought Greta.

She closed the window, lit a fire, placed the kettle so that the steam might enter the room, then wrung flannels out of hot water, and wrapped them about the child’s neck. She stayed all that night at the cottage, and sat up with the little one and nursed it. Mercy could not be persuaded to go to bed, but she was very quiet. It had not yet taken hold of her that the child was seriously ill. He was drowsy and a little

feverish, his pulse beat fast and he coughed hard sometimes, but he would be better in the morning. Oh yes, he would soon be well again, and tearing up the flowers in the garden.

Towards midnight the pulse fell rapidly, the breathing became quieter, and the whole nature seemed to sink. Mercy listened with her ear bent down at the child's mouth, and a smile of ineffable joy spread itself over her face.

'Bless him, he is sleeping so calmly,' she said.

Greta did not answer.

'The "puss" and the "man" don't darken his little life so much now,' continued Mercy cheerily.

'No, dear,' said Greta, in as strong a voice as she could summon.

'All will be well with my darling boy soon, will it not?'

'Yes, dear,' said Greta, with a struggle.

Happily Mercy could not read the other answer in her face.

Mercy had put her sensitive fingers on

the child's nose, and was touching him lightly about the mouth.

'Greta,' she said in a startled whisper, does he look pinched?'

'A little,' said Greta quietly.

'And his skin—is it cold and clammy?'

'We must give him another hot flannel,' said Greta.

Mercy sat at the bedside, and said nothing for an hour. Then all at once, and in a strange, harsh voice, she said:

'I wish God had not made Ralphie so winsome.'

Greta started at the words, but made no answer.

The daylight came early. As the first gleams of gray light came in at the window, Greta turned to where Mercy sat in silence. It was a sad face that she saw in the mingled yellow light of the dying lamp and the gray of the dawn.

Mercy spoke again.

'Greta, do you remember what Mistress Branthet said when her baby died last back end gone twelvemonth?'

Greta looked up quickly at the bandaged eyes.

‘What?’ she asked.

‘Well, Parson Christian tried to comfort her, and said, “Your baby is now an angel in Paradise,” and she turned on him with “Shaf on your angels—I want none on ‘em—I want my little girl.”’

Mercy’s voice broke into a sob.

Towards ten o’clock the doctor came. He had been detained. Very sorry to disoblige Mrs. Ritson, but fact was old Mr. de Broadthwaite had an attack of lumbago, complicated by a bout of toothache, and everybody knew he was most exacting. Young person’s baby ill? Feverish, restless, starts in its sleep, and cough?—Ah, croupy cough—yes, croup, true croup, not spasmodic. Let him see, how old? A year and a half? Ah, bad, very. Most frequent in second year of infancy. Dangerous, highly so. Forms a membrane that occludes air passages. Often ends in convulsions, and child suffocates. Sad, very. Let him see again. How long

since the attack began? Yesterday at four. Ah, far gone, far. The great man soon vanished, leaving behind him a harmless preparation of aconite and ipecacuanha.

Mercy had heard all, and her pent-up grief broke out in sobs.

‘Oh, to think I shall hear my Ralphie no more, and to know his white cold face is looking up from a coffin, while other children are playing in the sunshine and chasing the butterflies! No, no, it cannot be; God will not let it come to pass; I will pray to Him and He will save my child. Why, He can do anything, and He has all the world. What is my little baby boy to Him? He will not let it be taken from me.’

Greta’s heart was too full for speech. But she might weep in silence, and none there would know. Mercy stretched across the bed, and tenderly folding the child in her arms, she lifted him up, and then went down on her knees.

‘Merciful Father,’ she said in a childish voice of sweet confidence, ‘this is my

baby, my Ralphie, and I love him so dearly. You would never think how much I love him. But he is ill, and doctor says he may die. Oh, dear Father, only think what it would be to say, "His little face is gone." And then I have never seen him. You will not take him away until his mother sees him. So soon, too. Only five days more. Why, it is quite close. Not to-morrow, nor the next day, nor the next, but the day after that.'

She put in many another childlike plea, and then rose with a smile on her pale lips and replaced the little one on his pillow.

'How patient he is,' she said. 'He can't say "Thank you," but I'm sure his eyes are speaking. Let me feel.' She put her finger lightly on the child's lids. 'No, they are shut; he must be sleeping. Oh, dear, he sleeps very much. Is he gaining colour? How quiet he is. If he would only say "Mamma!" How I wish I could see him!'

She was very quiet for a while, and then plucked at Greta's gown suddenly.

‘Greta,’ she said eagerly, ‘something tells me that if I could only see Ralphie I should save him.’

Greta started up in terror. ‘No, no, no; you must not think of it,’ she said.

‘But something whispered it. It must have been God Himself. You know we ought to obey God always.’

‘Mercy, it was not God who said that. It was your own heart. You must not heed it.’

‘I’m sure it was God,’ said Mercy. ‘And I heard it quite plain.’

‘Mercy, my darling, think what you are saying. Think what it is you wish to do. If you do it, you will be blind for ever.’

‘But I will have saved my Ralphie.’

‘No, no ; you will not.’

‘Will he not be saved, Greta?’

‘Only our heavenly Father knows.’

‘Well, He whispered it in my heart. And, as you say, He knows best.’

Greta was almost distraught with fear. The noble soul in her would not allow her to appeal to Mercy’s gratitude against the

plea of maternal love. But she felt that all her happiness hung on that chance. If Mercy regained her sight, all would be well with her and hers ; but if she lost it the future must be a blank.

The day wore slowly on, and the child sank and sank. At evening the old charcoal-burner returned, and went into the bedroom. He stood a moment and looked down at the pinched little face, and when the child's eyes opened drowsily for a moment he put his withered forefinger into its palm ; but there was no longer a responsive clasp of the chubby hand.

The old man's lips quivered behind his white beard.

' It were a winsome wee thing,' he said faintly, and then turned away.

He left his supper untouched, and went into the porch. There he sat on the bench and whittled a blackthorn stick. The sun was sinking over the head of the Eel Crag ; the valley lay deep in a purple haze ; only the bald top of Cat Bells stood out bright in the glory of the passing day. A gentle

breeze came up from the south, and the young corn chattered with its multitudinous tongues in the field below. The dog lay at the charcoal-burner's feet, blinking in the sun and snapping lazily at a buzzing fly.

The little life within was ebbing away. No longer racked by the ringing cough, the loud breathing became less frequent and more harsh. Mercy lifted the child from the bed, and sat with it before the fire. Greta saw its eyes open, and at the same moment she saw the little lips move slightly, but she heard nothing.

‘He is calling his mamma,’ said Mercy, with her ear bent towards the child’s mouth.

There was silence for a long time. Mercy pressed the child to her breast; its close presence seemed to soothe her. Greta stood and looked down; she saw the little lips move once more, but again she heard no sound.

‘He is calling his mamma,’ repeated Mercy wistfully, ‘and oh, he seems such a long way off.’

Once again the little lips moved.

'He is calling me,' said Mercy, listening intently ; and she grew restless and excited. 'He is going away. I can hear him. He is far off. Ralphie, Ralphie !'

She had lifted the child up to her face. 'Ralphie, Ralphie !' she cried.

'Give me the baby, Mercy,' said Greta.

But the mother clung to it with a convulsive grasp.

'Ralphie, Ralphie, Ralphie . . .'

There was a sudden flash of some white thing. In an instant the bandage had fallen from Mercy's head, and she was peering down into the child's face with wild eyes.

'Ralphie, Ralphie ! . . . *Hugh !*' she cried.

The mother had seen her babe at last, and in that instant she had recognised the features of its father.

At the next moment the angel of God passed through that troubled house, and the child lay dead at the mother's breast.

Mercy saw it all, and her impassioned

mood left her. She rose to her feet quietly, and laid the little one in the bed. There was never a sigh more, never a tear. Only her face was ashy pale, and her whitening lips quivered.

‘Greta,’ she said, very slowly, ‘will you go for *him*?’

Greta kissed the girl’s forehead tenderly. Her own calm, stedfast, enduring spirit sank. All the world was dead to her now. ‘Yes, dear,’ she whispered.

The next minute she was gone from the room.

CHAPTER IX.

THE evening was closing in ; now and then the shrill cries of the birds pealed and echoed in the still air ; a long fibrous streak of silver in the sky ebbed away over the head of Hindscarth. Greta hastened towards the pit brow. The clank of the iron chain in the gear told that the cage in the shaft was working.

It was a year and a half since her life had first been overshadowed by a disaster more black and terrible than death itself, and never for an instant had the clouds been lifted until three days ago. Then, in a moment, the light had pierced through the empty sky, and a way had been wrought for her out of the labyrinth of misery. But even that passage for life and hope and

love seemed now to be closed by the grim countenance of doom.

Mercy would be blind for ever! All was over and done. Greta's strong, calm spirit sank and sank. She saw the impostor holding to the end the name and place of the good man ; and she saw the good man dragging his toilsome way through life—an outcast, a byword, loaded with ignominy, branded with crime. And that unhappy man was her husband, and he had no stay but in her love, no hope but in her faith.

Greta stopped at the door of Hugh Ritson's office and knocked. A moment later he and she were face to face. He was dressed in his pit flannels, and was standing by a table on which a lamp burned. When he recognised her, he passed one hand across his brow, the other he rested on the mantelpiece. There was a momentary twitching of her lips, and he involuntarily remarked that in the time that had passed since they last met she had grown thinner.

'Come with me,' she said in a trembling whisper. 'Mercy's child is dead, and the

poor girl is asking for you in her great trouble.'

He did not speak at once, but shaded his eyes from the lamp. Then he said, in a voice unlike his own, 'I will follow you.'

She had held the door in her hand, and now she turned to go. He took one step towards her.

'Greta, have you nothing more to say to me?' he asked.

'What do you wish me to say?'

He did not answer; his eyes fell before her.

There was a slight wave of her hand as she added, 'The same room ought never to contain both you and me—it never should have done so—but this is not my errand.'

'I have deserved it,' he said humbly.

'The cruel work is done. Yes, done past undoing. You have not heard the last of it. Then, since you ask me what I have to say to you, it is this: That man, that instrument of your malice who is now your master, has been to say that he can

compel me to live with him, or imprison me if I refuse. Can he do it ?

Hugh Ritson lifted his eyes with a blind, vacant stare.

‘To live with him ? Him ? You to live with him ?’ he said absently.

‘To live under his roof—those were his words. Can he do it ? I mean if the law recognises him as my husband ?’

Hugh Ritson’s eyes wandered.

‘Do it? your husband ?’ he echoed incoherently.

‘I know well what he wants,’ said Greta, breathing heavily ; ‘it is not myself he is anxious for—but he cannot have the one without the other.’

‘The one without the other?’ echoed Hugh Ritson in a low tone. Then he strode across the room in visible agitation. ‘Greta, that man is—— Do you know *who* he is ?’

‘Paul Drayton, the innkeeper of Hendon,’ she answered calmly.

‘No, no ; he is your——’

He paused, his brows knit, his fingers interlaced. Her bosom swelled.

‘Would you tell *me* that he is my husband?’ she said indignantly.

Hugh Ritson again passed his hand across his brow.

‘Greta, I have deserved your distrust,’ he said, in an altered tone.

‘What is done can never be undone,’ she answered.

His voice had regained its calmness, but his manner was still agitated.

‘I may serve you even yet,’ he said; ‘I have done you too much wrong, I know that.’

‘What is your remorse worth now?’ she asked. ‘It comes too late.’

Then he looked her steadily in the face and replied :

‘Greta, it is well said that the most miserable man in all the world is he who feels remorse *before* he does the wrong. I was—I am—that man. I did what I did knowing well that I should repent it—aye, to the last hour of my life. But I was driven to it—I had no power to resist it—it mastered me then—it would master me now.’

The finger-tips of Greta's right hand were pressed close against her cheek. Hugh Ritson took a step nearer.

'Greta,' he said, and his voice fell to a broken whisper, 'there are some men to whom love is a passing breath, a gentle gale that beats on the face and sports in the hair, and then is gone. To me it is a wound, a deep, corrosive, inward wound that yearns and burns.'

Greta shuddered; it was as if his words stung her. Then with an impatient gesture she turned again towards the door, saying:

'This is the death-hour of your child, and, Heaven pardon you, it seems to be the death-hour of your brother's hopes too.' She faced about. 'Do you think of *him*?' she added, lifting her voice. 'When you see this man in his place, wasting his substance, and mine, do you ever think of him *where he is?*' Her voice trembled and broke. There was a moment's silence. She had turned her head aside, and he heard the low sound of sobs.

'Yes, I think of him,' he answered slowly.

‘At night, in the sleepless hours, I do think of him where he is ;—and I think of him as a happy man. Yes, a happy man ! What if he wears a convict’s dress ?—*his* soul is yoked to no deadening burden. As for me —well, *look at me !*’ He smiled grimly.

‘I have heard everything,’ said Greta ; ‘you have sown the wind, and you are reaping the whirlwind.’

Something like a laugh broke from him. It came from the waters of bitterness that lay deep in his heart.

‘Not that,’ he said. ‘All that will pass away.’

She was on the threshold ; a force of which she knew nothing held her there.

‘Greta, I am not so bad a man as perhaps I seem ; I am a riddle that you may not read. The time is near when I shall trouble the world no more, and it will be but a poor wounded name I shall leave behind me, will it not ? Greta, would it be a mockery to ask you to forgive me ?’

‘There are others who have more to forgive,’ said Greta. ‘One of them is waiting

for you at this moment, and, poor girl! her heart is broken.'

Hugh Ritson bent his head slightly, and Greta pulled the door after her.

CHAPTER X.

THE evening had closed in ; the watery veil that goes between day and night was hanging in the air ; the wind had risen, and the trees were troubled. When Hugh Ritson reached the cottage, all was dark about the house save for the red glow from the peat fire which came out into the open porch. The old Laird Fisher was sitting there, a blackthorn stick at his feet, his elbows on his knees, his cheeks rested on his hands. The drowsy glow fell on his drooping white head. As Hugh Ritson passed into the kitchen, the old man lifted to his a countenance on which grief and reproach were stamped together. Hugh Ritson's proud spirit was rebuked by the speechless sorrow of that look. It was such a look as a

wounded hound lifts to the eyes of a brutal master.

A sheep-dog was stretched at full length before the slumbering fire. The kitchen was empty, and silent too, except for the tick of the clock and the collie's laboured breathing. But at the sound of Hugh's uncertain step on the hard earthen floor, the door of the bedroom opened, and Greta motioned him to enter.

A candle burned near the bed. Before a fire, Mercy Fisher sat with Parson Christian. Her head lay on a table that stood between, her face buried in her encircled arms. One hand lay open beside the long loose tresses of yellow hair, and the Parson's hand rested upon it caressingly. Parson Christian rose as Hugh Ritson entered, and, bowing coldly, he left the room; Greta had already gone out, and he rejoined her in the kitchen.

Mercy lifted her head and looked up at Hugh. There was not a tear in her weary, red, swollen eyes, and not a sigh came from her heaving breast. She rose quietly, and

taking Hugh's hand in her own, she drew him to the bedside.

' See where he is,' she said in a voice of piercing earnestness, and with her other hand she lifted a handkerchief from the little white face. Hugh Ritson shuddered. He saw his own features as if memory had brought them in an instant from the long past.

Mercy disengaged her hand, and silently hid her face. But she did not weep.

' My little Ralphie,' she said plaintively, ' how quiet he is now! Oh, but you should have seen him when he was like a glistening ray of morning light. Why did you not come before?'

Hugh Ritson stood there looking down at the child's dead face, and made no answer.

' It is better as it is,' his heart whispered at that moment. The next instant his whole frame quivered. What was the thought that had risen unbidden within him? Better that his child should lie there cold and lifeless than that it should fill this

desolate house with joy and love? Was he, then, so black a villain? God forbid! Yet it *was* better so.

'All is over now,' said Mercy, and her hands fell from her face. She turned her weary eyes full upon him and added, 'We have been punished already.'

'Punished?' said Hugh. 'We?' There was silence for a moment; and then, dropping his voice until it was scarcely audible, he said, 'Your burden is heavy to bear, my poor girl.'

Her slight figure swayed a little.

'I could bear it no longer,' she answered.

'Many a one has thought that before you,' he said; 'but God alone knows what we cannot bear until we are tried.'

'Well, all is over now,' she repeated listlessly.

She spoke of herself as if her days were already ended and past; as if her orb of life had been rounded by the brief span of the little existence that lay finished upon the bed. Hugh Ritson looked at her, and the muscles of his face twitched. Her weary

eyes were still dry. Their dim light seemed to come from far away.

‘How I prayed that I might see my Ralphie,’ she said. ‘I thought surely God had willed it that I should never see my child. Perhaps that was to be my punishment for—all that had taken place. But I prayed still. Oh, you would not think how much I pray! But it must have been a wicked prayer.’

She hid her face once more in her hands, and added, with unexpected animation:

‘God heard my prayer, and answered it—but see!’ She pointed to the child. ‘I saw him—yes, I saw him—*die!*’

Hugh Ritson was moved, but his heart was bitter. At that moment he cursed the faith that held in bondage the soul of the woman at his side. Would that he could trample it underfoot, and break for ever the chains by which it held the simple.

‘Hugh,’ she said, and her voice softened, ‘we are about to part for ever. Our little Ralphie—yours and mine—he calls me. I could not live without him. God would

not make me do that. He has punished me already, and He is merciful. Only think, our Ralphie is in heaven.'

She paused and bit her lip, and drew her breath audibly inwards. Her face took then a death-like hue, and all at once her voice overflowed with anguish.

'Do you know, something whispered at that instant that God had not punished us enough, that Ralphie was not in heaven, and that the sins of the fathers—— Oh, my darling, my darling!'

With a shrill cry she stopped, turned to the bed, threw her outspread arms about the child, and kissed it fervently.

The tears came at length, and rained down on that little silent face. Hugh Ritson could support the strain no longer.

'Mercy,' he said, and his voice had a deep tremor. 'Mercy, if there is any sin it is mine, and if there is to be any punishment hereafter that will be mine too. As for your little boy, be sure he is in heaven.' He had stepped to the door, and his thumb was on the wooden latch. 'You say

rightly, we shall never meet again,' he said, in a muffled voice ; 'good-bye.'

Mercy lifted her tearful face. 'Give me your hand at parting,' she said in an imploring tone. He was on the opposite side of the bed from where she stood, and she reached her hand across it. He took a step nearer, and his hand closed in hers. Between them and beneath their clasped hands lay the child. 'Hugh, we could not love in this world—something went astray with us ; but we shall meet again, shall we not ?'

He turned his eyes away.

'Perhaps,' he answered.

'Promise me,' she said ; 'promise me.'

He drew his breath hard.

'If there is a God and a judgment, be sure we shall meet,' he said.

His voice broke. He turned abruptly aside and hurried out of the house.

CHAPTER XI.

THE night was now dark ; there was no moon, and there were no stars ; the wind soughed mournfully through the trees. In the occasional lull the rumble of the cataracts drifted heavily through the air.

Hugh Ritson walked in the darkness with drooping head. He was not making for the pit brow ; he had taken the opposite direction. When he reached the village he stopped at the Flying Horse. Loud peals of laughter came from the parlour, hidden by red blinds from the road.

He stood at the door that opened into the bar. The landlady, her face turned from him, was talking with obvious animation to a daleswoman who stood with a jug in hand at the other side of the counter.

‘What, woman, thoo’s surely heard what happen’t at the Ghyll this morning?’

‘Nay, Bessie, I’s been thrang as Throp wife, cleaning and tittyvating.’

‘Well, lass, they’ve telt me as it were shocking. Two brothers and such a fratch. It coom’t to blows at last, and they do say ’at Master Hugh is nigh amaist dead with a bash the girt fellow gave him.’

Hugh Ritson rapped sharply at the door.

‘Tell your husband I wish to see him,’ he said.

The landlady looked up, fumbled with a napkin, and answered nervously, ‘Yes, sir.’ Then she hobbled to the door of the parlour and opened it. A wave of mingled noise, vapour, and foul odours came through the aperture. ‘Tommy!’ she screamed above the babel.

The landlord appeared.

‘Can you send me a dog-cart at half-past four in the morning?’ said Hugh.

‘May be—it’s a gay canny hour, I reckon,’ said the landlord.

He pulled at a long pipe as he spoke, and

his face, which was flushed, wore an impudent smile.

'I have to catch the five o'clock train,' Hugh answered.

'To London?' One cheek was twisted into numerous wrinkles.

'I said the five train,' said Hugh sternly.
'Can you do it?'

'I's niver said nay—it'll be three half-crowns.'

Hugh put half a sovereign on the counter.

'Let it be sent at half-past four promptly.'

'To the Ghyll?'

The twist of the cheek was a shade less perceptible.

'To the pit brow.'

The parlour door opened again, and Natt stood on the threshold. The stableman's sleepy eyes awakened to a knowing twinkle. Then his flat face disappeared, and a thin titter mingled audibly with the clamour within. In another moment the door was thrown wide open, and Drayton came

slouching out. His hair fell over his forehead, from which his hat was tipped back. A cigar was perched between his teeth ; the tips of his fingers were thrust into his waistcoat pockets.

‘ Come in, I’ve summat to show you,’ he said.

Hugh did not stir, but he lifted his head and looked into the room. Half a score of the riff-raff of the dale were seated amid clouds of smoke. On the wooden mantel-shelf above the wide ingle a large book stood open, and the leaves fluttered with the wind that came through the door.

‘ I hain’t forgotten what you said long ago about the Parson’s book,’ said Drayton, ‘ so here it is, and a mighty valuable thing I call it. You thought to frighten me with it, but bless yer soul, I like it, I do. Listen.’

Drayton stepped back into the room, turned the leaves, and began to read in a lusty tone :

‘ 1847.—November 18.—Thomas said Allan was fresh from Scotland, being Scot-

tish born, and that his wife was Irish, and that they had a child called Paul, only a few months old, and not yet walking.'

It was the Parson's diary.

'That's good enough, ain't it, Master Hugh Ritson?' said Drayton, with an ungainly bow, and a vast show of civility, followed instantly by a sidelong leer at his cronies about him.

Hugh Ritson held himself stiffly and merely said :

'Where did you get it ?'

At this question there were sundry snorts and titters and muttered responses from the men at the tables. Hugh's eyes passed over them with a steely glance.

'Stolen it, I suppose,' he said quietly.

'Ay,' said Drayton, 'and a neat job too. Natt 'ticed away the Methodee man while I borrowed it.'

Drayton seemed to be proud of his share in the transaction, and his friends laughed loudly at the adroit turn he had given to

the matter. Natt's drowsy eyes were preternaturally bright at that great moment.

Hugh Ritson's forehead darkened with ire.

'This is your gratitude to the clergyman,' he said.

Sundry further snorts and sniggers went round the tables.

'There's not a man of you who is not beholden to Parson Christian,' said Hugh sternly. He twisted sharply round upon one graybeard whose laugh still rumbled between his teeth. 'Reuben Rae, who nursed your sick wife? John Proudfoot,' to the blacksmith, 'what about your child down with the fever?' His quick eye traversed the parlour, and more than one lusty crony was fain to bury his face in his breast. 'Yet you laugh, brave fellows as you are, when the good man's house is broken into by a thief.'

Drayton took a swift stride towards him.

'Drop it, and quick,' he shouted.

Hugh Ritson governed himself with an effort.

‘I’m not here to brawl,’ he said quietly.

‘Pigeon-livered blatherskite—that’s what I call ye—d’ye hear?’ said Drayton.

Hugh’s face flinched, but he turned on his heel, and was on the road at the next instant.

Drayton followed him out, laughing boisterously. Hugh made one quick step backwards and shut the door ; then he turned about on Drayton, whose cruel face could be dimly seen in the hazy red light that came through the blinds.

‘You have tried to torture me,’ he said, ‘just as you would hang a dog by its tail, or draw the teeth of a rat. You have threatened with worse torture a good and loyal woman. You are a scoundrel, and you know it. But even you would hesitate if you knew for certain who or what you are. Let me tell you again, now, when we are alone, and while I have no personal interest to serve. You are the man whose name I gave you—Paul Lowther, son of Robert Lowther—and that lady, my brother’s wife, whom for reason of profit

you would compel to live under the same roof with you, is your own sister.'

Drayton's loud guffaw rang out above the wind's moan in the trees. His cronies within heard it and listened.

'It's a rare old story, that is. Let me see ; you've told it before, I fancy.'

'Then it was a lie ; now it's God's truth,' said Hugh.

Drayton laughed again.

'And then it was believed, but now it's not. No, no, Master Hugh, it won't pass.'

'We will see.'

Hugh Ritson had swung about and was gone.

Drayton went back to his friends.

'Hasn't the pluck of a pigeon when it comes to the push,' he muttered.

'Ey, he wears a bonny white feather in his cap, for sure,' said old Reuben Rae.

'No fight in 'im—no'but tongue lather,' said John, the blacksmith.

Hugh Ritson walked through the darkness to the pit brow. The glow of the

furnace lit up the air to the south, and showed vaguely the brant sides of the fell; the dull thud of the engine, the clank of the chain, and the sharp crack of the refuse tumbling down the bank from the banksman's barrow were the only sounds that rose above the wind's loud whistle.

Gubblum was at the mouth of the shaft.

'Oglethorpe,' said Hugh, 'how many of the gangs are below to-night?'

'All but two—auld Reuben's and Jim South'et's.'

'Then they have chosen to work on?'

'Ey, another fortnight—trusting to get their wage afore that, please God.'

'They shall not be disappointed.'

Hugh Ritson turned away. Gubblum trundled his last wheelbarrow to the edge of the bank, and then rested and said to himself, 'He takes it cool enough onyway.'

But the outside tranquillity disappeared when Hugh Ritson reached his own room on the pit brow. He bathed his hot forehead again and again. His fingers twitched nervously, and he plunged his perspiring

hands into cold water above the wrists, holding them there for several minutes. Not for long did he sit in one seat. He tramped the room uneasily, his infirm foot trailing heavily. Then he threw himself on the couch, tossed from side to side, rose and resumed his melancholy walk. Thus an hour passed drearily.

His mind recalled one by one the events of the day. And one by one there came crowding back upon him the events of the two years that had passed since his father's death. A hurricane was upheaving every memory of his mind. And every memory had its own particular sting, and came up as a blight to fret his soul. He tried to guard himself from himself. What he had first thought to do was but in defence of his strict legal rights, and if he had gone farther—if he had done more without daring to think of it until it was done—then it was love that had led him astray. Was it so cruel a thing to be just? So foul a thing to love?

But above the shufflings of remorse, above

the stiflings of regret, above the plea of a maddening love, was the voice of revenge speaking loudly in his soul. That man, his instrument, now his master, Paul Lowther, must be brought down, and his time-serving sponsor with him. But how? There was but one way—by denouncing himself. Yes, that was the sole outlet for his outraged and baffled spirit. He must go to the proper quarter and say, ‘I have perjured myself, and sworn away my brother’s liberty. The man who was condemned as Paul Drayton is Paul Ritson. I did it all.’

That would bring this vulgar scoundrel to the dust, but at what a price! The convict’s dress now worn by his brother would soon be worn by him. And what solace would it be then that the same suit would be worn by the impostor also? Yet why prate of solace in a matter like this? What alternative was left to him? In what quarter of the sky was the light dawning for him? He was travelling towards the deepening night, and the day of his life was done.

What if he allowed everything to take its course? Well, he was a disgraced and ruined man, turned adrift from his father's house, and doomed to see a stranger living there. Did he lack gall to make such a climax bitter? Bitter! eh ; and a thousand times the more bitter because he himself had, for ends of his own, first placed the scoundrel where he sat.

No, no, no ; Paul Lowther must be brought down, and with him must fall the poor ruins of a better man. Yes, a better man, let the world say what it would.

Could it occur that he would not be believed ? that when he said ‘Take me, I am a perjurer,’ they would answer, ‘No, your self-denunciation is only a freak of revenge, a mad attempt to injure the relative who has turned you out of his house ?’ Hugh Ritson laughed as the grim irony of such a possible situation flashed upon him : a man self-condemned and saved from punishment by the defence of his enemy !

There was a knock at his door. In his stupor he was not at first conscious of what

the knock meant. At length he recalled himself and cried :

‘Come in.’

Gubblum Oglethorpe entered.

‘The men on the twelve o’clock shift are just about ganging down, and they want to tak’ a few mair forks with them. They’ve telt me ’at the timber is splitting like match-wood under the sandy vein.’

Hugh Ritson made an effort to gather the purport of Gubblum’s message.

‘Tell them to take the forks,’ he said in a low tone. Gubblum was backing out, and stopped.

‘I reckon thoo’s not heeard the last frae auld Mattha’s,’ he said in another voice.

‘What is it, Oglethorpe?’ said Hugh, his head bent over the table.

‘Robbie South’et’s wife has been up to t’ brow and says that Mercy’s laal thing is gone.’

Hugh did not lift his eyes.

‘Is that the last?’ he said.

‘Nay, but warse. The lass herself tore

the bandage frae her eyes, and she's gone stone blind, and that's for iver.'

Hugh's head bent closer over the table.

'Good-night, Oglethorpe,' he said.

Gubblum backed out, muttering to himself as he returned to the shaft, 'A cool hand, how-an-iver.'

The moment the door closed, Hugh Ritson tramped the floor in restless perambulations. What had he thought of doing? Delivering himself to justice as a perjurer? Had he then no duty left in life that he must needs gratify his revenge in a kind of death? What of the woman who had suffered for him? What of the broken heart and the wrecked home? Were these as nothing against the humiliation of a proud spirit?

Never for an instant, never in his bitterest agony, did Hugh Ritson lie to his own soul and say that the resolution he had formed was prompted by remorse for what he had done to Paul Ritson; not revenge for what he had suffered from Paul Drayton. To be a saint when sick ; to find the conscience active

when defeat overwhelmed it—that was for the weak dregs of humanity. But such paltering was not for him.

On the one hand revenge, on the other duty—which was he to follow? The wretched man could come to no decision; and when the fingers of his watch pointed to one o'clock he lay down on the couch to rest.

It was not sleep that he wanted; sleep had of late become too full of terrors; but sleep overcame him, nevertheless. His face when he slept was the face of a man in pain; and dreams came that were the distorted reflections of his waking thoughts. He dreamt that he had died in infancy. Calm, serene, very sweet, and peaceful, his little innocent face of childhood looked up from the white pillow. He thought his mother bent over him, and shed many tears; but he himself belonged to another world of beings, and looked down on both. ‘It is better so,’ he thought, ‘and the tears she weeps are blest.’

At this he awoke, and rose to his feet. What soft nothings men had said of sleep!

‘Oh sleep, it is a gentle thing, beloved from pole to pole!’ Gentle! More tyrannous than death. The melancholy perambulation ended, and he lay down once more. He slept and dreamt again. This time he had killed his own brother. A moment before they had stood face to face—vigorous, wrathful, with eyes that flashed, and hands uplifted. Now his brother lay quiet and awful at his feet, and the great silence was broken by a voice from heaven crying, ‘A fugitive and a vagabond shalt thou be on the earth.’

He started to his feet in terror. ‘Mercy, mercy!’ he cried. Then he drew his breath hard and looked about him. ‘A dream—only another dream,’ he said to himself, and laughed between his close-set teeth. The lamp still burned on the table. He rose, drew a key from his pocket, opened a cupboard, and took out a small bottle. It contained an opiate. ‘Since I must sleep, let my sleep at least be dreamless,’ he said, and he measured a dose. He was lifting the glass to his lips, when he caught sight of his face in the glass. ‘Pitiful! pitiful!

A mere dream unnerves me. Pitiful enough, forsooth! And so I must needs hide myself from myself behind a bulwark like this!' He held the drug to the light, and while his hand trembled he laughed. Then he drank it off, put out the light, and sat on the couch.

The dawn had fretted the sky, and the first streaks of day crept in at the window, when the lamp's yellow light was gone. Hugh Ritson sat in the gray gloom, his knees drawn close under his chin, his arms folded over his breast, his head bent heavily forward. He was crooning an old song. Presently the voice grew thick, the eye became clouded, and then the head fell back. He was asleep, and in his sleep he dreamt again. Or was it a vision, and not a dream, that came to him now? He thought he stood in a room which he had seen before. On the bed some white thing lay. It was a child, and the little soul had fled. Beside it a woman cowered, and moaned 'Guilty, guilty!' Her eyes were fixed on the child, yet she saw nothing; the sightless orbs were bleached. But with her heart she saw

the child ; and she saw himself also as he entered. Then it seemed that she turned her blind face towards him, and called on him by name. The next instant she was gone. Her seat was vacant, the bed was empty; only a gray-bearded man sat by a cold grate. With an overpowering weight pressing him down, it seemed to Hugh that he threw up his head, and again he heard his name.

He leapt to his feet. Big beads of cold sweat stood on his forehead. ‘ Mercy is dead,’ he whispered with awe. ‘ She has gone to put in her plea of guilty. She is in God’s great hand.’

The next moment a voice shouted ‘ Mr. Ritson !’

He listened, and in the gray light his stony countenance smiled grimly.

‘ Mr. Ritson !’ once more, followed by the rap of a whip-handle against the door.

‘ Tommy the landlord,’ said Hugh Ritson, and he broke into a harsh laugh. ‘ So *you* were my angel, Tommy, eh?’

Another harsh laugh. The landlord, sit-

ting in the dog-cart outside, heard it, and thought to himself, ‘Some one with him.’

Hugh Ritson plunged his head into the wash-basin, and rubbed himself vigorously with a rough towel. ‘My last sleep is over,’ he said, glancing aside with fearful eyes at the couch. ‘I’ll do this thing that I am bent upon; but no more sleep, and no more dreams!’

He opened the door, threw a rug up to the landlord, put on an ulster, and leapt into the dog-cart. They started away at a quick trot. A chill morning breeze swept down the vale. The sun was rising above Cat Bells, but Hugh Ritson still felt as if he were travelling towards the deepening night. He sat with folded arms, and head bent on his breast.

‘Hasta heard what’s happened at auld Laird Fisher’s this morning?’ said the landlord.

Hugh answered in a low voice, ‘I’ve heard nothing.’

‘The lass has followed her barn rather sudden’t. Ey, she’s gone for sure. Died a

matter of half an hour ago. I heard it frae the Parson as I coom't by.'

Hugh Ritson bent yet lower his drooping head.

CHAPTER XII.

AT two o'clock that day Hugh Ritson arrived at Euston. He got into a cab and drove to Whitehall. At the Home Office he asked for the Secretary of State. A hundred obstacles arose to prevent him from penetrating to the head of the department. One official handed him over to another, the second to a third, the third to a fourth.

Hugh Ritson was hardly the man to be balked by such impediments. His business was with the Secretary of State, and none other. Parliament was in session, and the Home Secretary was at the afternoon sitting of the House. Hugh Ritson sought and found him there. He explained his purpose in few words, and was listened to with a faint smile of incredulity.

The Secretary was a stolid Yorkshireman, who affected whatever measure of bluffness had not been natural to him from birth. He first looked at his visitor with obvious doubts of his sanity; and when this suspicion had been set at rest by Hugh's incisive explanation, with an equally obvious desire to feel his bumps.

But the face of the Yorkshireman soon became complicated by other shades of expression than such as come of distrust of a man's reason or contempt of his sentimentality.

'Hadn't you better sleep on it, and come to see me at Whitehall in the morning?' he said, with more respect than he had yet shown. 'Then if you are still of the same mind, I will send for the Public Prosecutor.'

Hugh Ritson bowed his acquiescence.

'And can I have the order for Portland?' he said.

'Probably. It will be against the new regulation that none may visit a convict prison except prison officials and persons in-

teredested in prison discipline. But we'll see what can be done.'

That night, Hugh Ritson called at the Convent of St. Margaret. It was late when he entered, and when he came out again, half an hour afterwards, the lamps were lit in Abbey Gardens. The light fell on the face of the lay sister who opened the door to him. She wore a gray gown, but no veil or scapular, and beneath the linen band that covered her hair her eyes were red and swollen.

Hugh Ritson hailed a hansom in the Broad Sanctuary, and drove to Hendon. The bar of the Hawk and Heron was full of carriers, carters, road-menders, and farm-labourers, all drinking and all noisy. But, despite this evidence of a thriving trade, the whole place had a bankrupt appearance as of things going to wreck. Jabez served behind the counter. He had developed a good deal of personal consequence, and held up his head, and repeatedly felt the altitude of a top-knot that curled there, and bore himself generally with the cockety air of

the young rooster after the neck of the old one has been screwed. Mrs. Drayton sat knitting in the room where Mercy and the neighbour's children once played together. When Hugh Ritson went in to her, the old body started.

‘Lors amercy me, sir, to think it's you. I'm that fearsome that I declare I shiver and quake at nothing. And good for nowt i' the world neither, not since my own flesh and blood, as you might say, disowned me.’

‘Do you mean at the trial?’ asked Hugh Ritson.

‘The trial, sir!’ said the landlady, lifting bewildered eyes, while the click of the needles ceased. ‘My Paul weren't there. Cumberland, sir—and you heard him yourself what he said of me.’ A corner of her housewife's apron went up to her face. ‘Me as had brought him up that tender! Well,’ recovering composure, ‘I've lost heart, and serve him right. I just lets the house and things go, I do. I trusts to Providence; and that Jabez, he's no better nor a babby in the public line.’

When Hugh Ritson left the inn, the old body's agitation increased. She had set down the knitting, and was fidgeting, first with her cap and then her apron.

‘Listen to me,’ said Hugh. ‘To-day is Friday. On Monday you must go to the convent where you saw the mother of Paul. Ask for Sister Grace. Will you remember —Sister Grace? She will tell you all.’

It was hard on eleven o’clock when Hugh Ritson returned to town. The streets were thronged, and he walked for a long hour amid the crowds that passed through the Strand. In all that multitudinous sea of faces, there was not a countenance on which the mark of suffering was more indelibly fixed than on his own.

His sensibilities were wrought up to an unwonted pitch. He was like a waif adrift in unknown waters, a cloud without anchor in a tempestuous sky; yet he felt that night as he had never felt before, that he had suddenly become possessed of another and most painful sense. Not a face in that sea of faces but he seemed to know its secret fear,

its joy and sorrow, the watchful dread that seared the hidden heart, the fluttering hope that buoyed it up.

It was an awful thing to be turned adrift in a world of sin and suffering with this agonizing sense. He could look, whether he would or not, beneath the smiling and rubicund countenance of the hail-fellow-well-met to that corrosive spot within where the trust of the widow and fatherless had been betrayed; or see beyond the stolid and heavy appearance proper to the ox the quivering features of the man who had stood long years ago above the dead body of the woman who had thrown her death at his door as sole reward for the life he had wrecked.

Nay, not only did the past write its manual there, but the future wrote its sign. He knew that the young girl in pink ribbons who was hurrying along with a smile on her lips, from the shop in the west to that unknown home in the east where the child of her shame had laughed and crowed and climbed up her bosom to her chin, was

doomed to find that the source of all her joy and half her sorrow lay cold and stiff in its crib.

He grew fearful of himself; he shuddered as the unsuspected murderer brushed his elbow; he shuddered yet more as a mirror flashed back the reflection of his own hard face, and the idea came to him that perhaps other eyes could see what his eyes saw.

He turned down Arundel Street and on to the Embankment. No! no! no! the merciful God had not willed it that any man should look so deeply into the heart of his fellow-man. That was indeed to know good and evil; and the thought stole over him that perhaps it was in degree as a man had eaten of the forbidden fruit of the tree of life that he was cursed with this bitter knowledge.

Here, on the quiet pavement that echoed to his footsteps, the air was free. He uncovered his head, and the light west wind played in his hair and cooled his temples. Not a star shone overhead, and the river that flowed in the bed below was dark.

More dark to him was the sea of humanity that flowed above.

He had heard that the death-roll of the Thames was one for every day of the year, and he leaned over the granite wall and wondered if the old river had claimed its toll for the day that was now almost done. His hair seemed to rise from its roots as he thought that perhaps at that very instant, in the black waters beneath him, the day's sacrifice was washing past.

He walked on, and the dull buzz of the Strand fell on his ear. What, after all, was the old god of the river to the juggernaut of the city? And it was now, when the fret of the day had worn down, that Hugh Ritson thought of all that he had left behind him in the distant North. There in the darkness and the silence, amid the mountains, by the waving trees and the rumbling ghylls, lay half the ruins of his ruined life. The glow of old London's many lights could not reach so far, but the shadow of that dark spot was here.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE clocks struck midnight, and he returned to the hotel at which he had engaged a bed. He did not lie down to sleep, but walked to and fro the night through.

Next morning at ten he was at the Home Office again. He saw the Secretary and some of the law officers of the Crown. When he came out he carried in his pocket an order to visit a convict in Portland, and was attended by a police-sergeant in plain clothes. They took train from Waterloo at two in the afternoon, and reached Weymouth at six. When they crossed the strip of sea the best of the day was gone, and a fresh breeze blew across the breakwater.

The Saxon walls of the castle at the foot of the Vern Hill reflected the chill blue of

the water; but far above, where the rocky coast dipped to the beach, the yellow stone, with the bluish clay in its crevices, shone in the glow of the sinking sun.

Hugh Ritson and his companion put up for the night at the Portland Arms Inn. A ruddy, round-faced man in middle life, clean shaven and dressed youthfully, was smoking in the parlour. He exchanged a salutation with the cordiality of one who was nothing loath for a chat; then he picked up the old Reeve staff, and explained the ancient method of computing tithes. But Hugh Ritson was in no humour for conversation, and after dinner he set out for a solitary walk. He took the road that turns from the beach through the villages of Chiswell and Fortune's Well. When he reached the top of the hill the sea lay around him; and beneath him, to the right and left of the summit, were the quarries where the convicts laboured, with two branches of an inclined railway leading down to the breakwater. On the summit itself, known as the Grove, was a long, high

granite wall, with a broad gateway, and the lancet lights of a lodge at one side of it. This was the convict prison, and the three or four houses in front of it were the residences of governor, chaplain, and chief warder. A cordon of cottages at a little distance were the homes of the assistant-warders. There were a few shops amid this little group of cottages, and one public-house, the Spotted Dog.

Hugh Ritson strolled into the tavern and sat down in a little ‘snuggery,’ which was separated from a similar apartment by a wooden partition that stood no higher than a tall man’s height, and left a space between the top stile and the ceiling. A company of men gossiped at the other side of the partition.

‘Talk of B 2001,’ said a guttural voice (Hugh Ritson started at the sound), ‘I took the stiff’ning out of him first go off. When he’d done he separates and come on from the moor ; I saw he wasn’t an old lag, so says I to ’im, “Green un,” I says, “if you’re leary you’ll fetch a easy lagging,

and if you're not it'll be bellows to mend with you." "What d'ye mean?" he says. "It's bloomin' 'ard work here," I says, "and maybe you don't get shin-of-beef soup to do it on. Bread and water, for a word," I says. "You're in my gang quarrying, and I won't work you 'ard except I'm druv to it, but I want wide men in my gang," I says, "and no putting the stick on agen the screw." "Don't understand," he says. "Then follow a straight tip," I says; "stand by your warder and he'll stand by you." Blest if that lag as I'd give that good advice to didn't get me fined the very next day.'

'Never!' said sundry incredulous voices.

'It was a hot afternoon, and I'd just whipped a quid in my mouth and leaned atop of my musket for forty winks after dinner. The second-timers was coddling afront of me, and 2001 and the young chap as was dying of the consumption was wheeling and filling ahead. Well, up come the Croker right in front of 2001, and shouts, "Warder," he shouts, "you're fined

for inattention.’’ Then off he goes. All right, Mr. 2001, I says, I’ll not mis-remember.’

‘ What did you do?’

‘ Do ?’ (a loud hollow laugh). ‘ That was when the barracks was building, and one day a bit of a newspaper blowed over from the officers’ quarters, and 2001 came on it, and the botcher picked it up. He’d chucked hisself quick. “ Right about face —march.” He got seven stretch, a month’s marks, and lost his bedding.’

A hearty laugh followed this account of a ‘ screw’s ’ revenge on a ‘ green ’ convict. Hugh Ritson listened and shuddered.

‘ I ain’t surprised at anything from that luny,’ said another voice. ‘ He was in my gang at the moor, and I know’d ’im. They put ’im in the soap-suds gang first, but he got hisself shifted. Then they sent ’im botching with the tailors, but he put out his broom for the Governor, and said a big lusty man same as ’im wasn’t for sitting on a board all day. The flat didn’t want to fetch a easy lagging, that’s the fact.’

There was a loud guffaw.

‘So they put ’im in my turf gang out on the moor, and one day a old clergyman come in gaiters and a broad-brimmer, and a face as if the master of the house were a-shaking at his hand, and the missis flopping downstairs to give him a smack of the lips. Well, 2001 saw him in Principal Warder Rennell’s office, and not afore the bars. So next day I says, “Got anybody outside as would like to send you summat by the Underground?” “The what?” he says, reg’lar black in the face. “The underground railway,” I says, tipping him a wink. “Get away from me, you blood-sucker,” he says. But I pinched ’im. The old lags were laughing at one of the grave-digger’s oyster-openers, when up comes Rennell. “Who’s laughing?” he says. “It’s 2001,” I says; “he’s always idling and malingering.”’

‘Ha, ha, ha, what did he get?’

‘Three days’ bread and water, a week’s marks, and loss of class privileges. He didn’t mind the grub and the time, but Jack-

in-the-box, who was warder on his landing, said he took it proper bad as he couldn't write home to the missis.'

'What's his dose?'

'Three. One of the old lags would do it on his head, and fetch it easy too. He's a scholar, and could get to be a wardsman in the infirmary, or medicine factotum for the Croker, or maybe book-keeper for the Governor. But he's earned no remissions, and he'll double his time afore he slings his hook again.'

Hugh Ritson could support the gossip no longer. He got up to leave the house, but before doing so he pushed open the door that led to the adjoining room, and stood a moment on the threshold, comprehending everything and everybody in one quick glance. The air breathed fresh outside. He walked in the gathering gloom of evening to the ruins of the church by the cliff, and, passing through the lych-gate, he came on the beaten track to the rocks. The rocks lay a hundred feet beneath, torn from the mainland in craggy masses that seemed

ready to slide from their base to the deep chasm between. Could it be possible that men who were the slaves of hinds like those in yonder tavern could cling to their little lives while a deliverance like this beetling cliff stood near? A cold smile played on Hugh Ritson's face as he thought that come what would such slavery was not for him.

The sycamore by the ruined chancel pattered in the breeze, and the wheatear's last notes came from its topmost bough. Far below the waves were rocking lazily. There were other waves at Hugh Ritson's feet—the graves of dead men. Some who were buried there long ago were buried in their chains. Under the earth the fettered men—on the ruins of the church the singing bird. Across the sea the light was every moment fading. In another hour the day would be done, and then the moon would look down peacefully on the fettered and the free.

Hugh Ritson returned to the Portland Arms Inn. He found the police-sergeant

in conversation with the ruddy-faced gentleman who had wished to explain to him the mysteries of the Reeve staff.

'He is the doctor at the prison,' whispered the sergeant aside.

Presently Hugh turned to the doctor and said :

'Do you happen to know the convict
B 2001 ?'

'Yes, Drayton,' said the doctor ; 'calls himself Ritson. Are you a friend ?'

Hugh Ritson's face quivered slightly.

'No,' he answered, 'I am *not* his friend.' Then, after a pause, 'But I have an order to see him. Besides, I have just heard him discussed by a company of warders in a pothouse on the hill.'

'Who were they ? What were they like ?'

'A tall man, one of them, fifty-five years of age, gray hair, grizzly beard, dark vindictive eyes, a gash on one cheek, and a voice like a crow's.'

'Humph ! Jim-the-ladder—a discharged soldier.'

‘Another, a cadaverous fellow, with a plausible tongue.’

‘Horrocks—an old second-classer; served his time at Dartmoor and got promotion.’

‘They both deserve one more and much higher promotion,’ said Hugh Ritson, with emphasis.

‘You mean this.’ The doctor laughed, and put the forefinger of one hand, held horizontally, to the tip of the other, held upright.

‘Can it be possible that the law is unable to maintain a fair stand-up fight with crime, and must needs call a gang of poltroons and black-mailers to its assistance?’

‘You heard a bad account of B 2001, I judge?’

‘I heard of nothing that he had done which the Pope of Rome might have feared to acknowledge.’

‘You are right—he’s as good a man as there’s on Portland Bill,’ said the doctor, ‘and if he’s not quite as immaculate as his Holiness, he’s in the right of it *this* time.’

Hugh Ritson glanced up.

‘ You’ve heard he’s in the punishment cells,’ said the doctor. ‘ By the way, you’ll not see him until Monday ; he can’t join his gang before, and he hasn’t a class privilege left, poor devil.’

Hugh inquired the cause.

‘ Since he came here he’s been yoked to a young fellow dying of consumption. The lad didn’t relish the infirmary—he lost his marks towards remission there. He knew the days he had to serve, and used to nick them off every night on his wooden spoon. It was a weary way from a thousand back, back, back to one. And that Jim-the-ladder took delight in keeping up the count by reports. The poor boy wanted to die in his mother’s arms. He had got his time down to a week, when the “ screw ” clapped as many marks on to him as added a month to his imprisonment. Then he lost heart, and dropped down like a flounder, and when they picked him up he was dead.’

‘ Was B 2001 yoked to him as usual ? ’

‘ He was ; and he broke the strap, sprang on the warder, and tore his rifle out of his

hands. Jim-the-ladder has been a prize-fighter in his day, and there was a tussle. He leapt back on B 2001 with a howl, and the blows fell like raindrops. There was a fearful clamour, the convicts screaming like madmen.'

'B 2001 is a powerful man,' said Hugh Ritson.

The doctor nodded.

'He closed with the warder, gripped him by the waist, twisted him on his loins, turned him heels over head, and brought him down in a sweep that would have battered the life out of any other man. Up came the civil guard, and the convict was brought into the lodge covered with dust, sweat, and blood, his eyes flashing like balls of fire. They had the lad's body on a stretcher beside him, the lips white, and the cheeks a mask of blue. It was a tremendous spectacle, I can tell you.'

Hugh Ritson's breast heaved, and somewhere deep down in his soul he surprised a feeling of pride. That man was a hero and his own brother !

'And so the convict was punished ?'

'Fourteen days' penal class diet, and marks enough for six months. He'll be out on Monday, and then he'll wear the blue cap that denotes a dangerous man.'

Hugh Ritson shuddered.

'Is it impossible to see him to-morrow ?'
he asked.

'Come up before church in the morning and ask for me, and we'll speak to the Governor.'

CHAPTER XIV.

EARLY next morning Hugh Ritson showed his order at the prison gates, and was admitted to the doctor's quarters. Hugh and the doctor went in search of the Governor, but learned that he was away from home for the day. There was nothing to do but to wait until morning in order to speak with the convict.

' You can stay here until to-morrow,' said the doctor; ' I can give you a shake-down. And now let us go off to church. But come this way first.'

They walked in the direction of that portion of the parade ground which was marked, in great white letters, ' 34 gang,' with the broad arrow beneath. Near to this stood a building composed chiefly of

wood and iron, and marked in similar letters ‘E Hall.’ They entered a corridor that led to an open landing in the shape of a many-sided polygon, each side being a door. In the middle of the landing there was an iron circular staircase that led to landings above and below. A warden paraded the open space, which was lit by gas jets.

‘Hush! Look,’ said the doctor, standing by the peep-hole in one of the doors, and at the same time putting out the gas jet that burned on the door-jamb.

Hugh Ritson approached, and at first he could see nothing in the darkness. But he heard a curious clanking noise from within. Then the glimmer of a feeble candle came through the bars, and he saw a box-like apartment, some seven feet long by four feet broad and eight feet high. It was a punishment cell. There was a shelf at the opposite end, and a tin wash-basin stood on it.

On the side of the door there must have been a similar shelf, on which the candle

burned. A broom, a can, and a bowl were on the brick floor. There was no other furniture except a hammock swung from end to end, and the convict was lying in it at this moment. It could be seen that a heavy chain was fastened with riveted rings around each ankle, and linked about the waist by a strap. At every movement this chain clanked ; night and day it was there; if the prisoner shifted in his sleep its grating sound broke on the silence of the cell, and banished the only sunshine of his life, the sunshine of his dreams. His head was back to the door, so that the light of the candle burning on the shelf might fall on a slate which rested on his breast. He was writing, and Hugh Ritson's quick eyes could decipher the words : ‘Oh, that it would please God to destroy me ; that He would but loose His hand and cut me off ! Oh wretched man that I am, who shall deliver me from the body of this death ?’ He paused in his writing and pecked like a bird at a hard piece of bread beside him.

Hugh Ritson fell back, and as his infirm foot grated along the floor the convict started and turned his face. It was a blank pale face, full of splendid resolution and the nobility of suffering, but without one ray of hope.

'Do you know him?' asked the doctor.

But Hugh Ritson's eyes were on the ground, and he made no answer.

They went to church. The civil guard was drawn up under the gallery with loaded rifles. Eight hundred convicts attended service: some of them were penitent; most of them were trying to make a high profession of contrition as a bid for the good graces of the chaplain. The obtrusive reverence of one sinister gray-head near at hand attracted Hugh Ritson's especial attention. He knelt with his face to the gallery in which the choir sat. Beside him was a youth fresh from Millbank. The hoary sinner was evidently initiating the green hand into the mysteries of his new home. He was loud in his responses, but his voice had a trick of

dropping suddenly to a whispered conference.

‘Who’s the fat un in the choir? A chap as is doing his ten. His missis chared to keep the kids, and one morning early he popped the old girl’s shoes.’

The voice of the chaplain interrupted a further explanation; but after another loud response the old rascal’s mouth was twisted awry with the words:

‘He’s a wide un, he is—seat in the choir got comfortable cushions. Besides, he gets off Saturday morning’s work for practising—got no more voice nor a corncrake.’

Evidently it was no disadvantage here to be the greatest of vagabonds. When a cadaverous old Jew came hobbling up the aisle with his gang, the gray-head whispered, with awe:

‘It’s old Mo; he’s in the stocking gang; but I did business with him when he could ha’ sent old Rothschild home for a pauper.’

At one moment the attention of the green hand was arrested by a tall man in

the black and gray that indicated a convict who had attempted to escape.

‘Says he’s in for twenty thousand, but it’s a lie,’ whispered the old man ; ‘he only knocked a living out of the religious fake.’

The last of the conference that Hugh Ritson overheard was a piece of touching advice.

‘Them as ’as any pluck in ’em turns savage, same as B 2001; them as ’asn’t knocks under—same as me; and I says to you, knock under.’

After service the Sacrament was celebrated. There must have been many hundreds of communicants, all humble in their piety. It could be noticed that the chaplain had sometimes to keep a tight grip of the goblet containing the wine.

That night Hugh Ritson lodged at the doctor’s quarters. He did not lie, but, as on the night before, he walked the long hours through, steadfastly resisting every temptation to sleep. At five in the morning he heard the great bell at the gate ring for two minutes, and, shortly afterwards, the tramp,

tramp, tramp of many feet under his window. The convicts, to the number of fifteen hundred, were drawn up on the parade ground. They looked chill in the cold light of early morning ; their gray jackets lay loose on their spare shoulders ; their hands hung inertly at their sides, and they walked with the oscillating motion of men whose feet were sore in their heavy boots. The civil guard was drawn up, the chief warder whistled, and then the men fell out into gangs of twenty-five each, attended by an assistant warder. ‘ Rear rank, take two paces to the right—march.’ Then the tramp, tramp, tramp again. As the outside gangs passed through the gate, each officer in charge received his rifle, bayonet, belt, and cartridge-box from the armourer at the lodge. The stone-dressing gang passed close under the window, and Hugh Ritson reeled back as one of the men—a stalwart fellow in a blue cap, who was walking abreast of a misshapen creature with a face full of ferocity—lifted his eyes upwards from the file.

At eight o'clock the Governor appeared at his receiving-office. He was a slight man with the face and figure of a greyhound. His military frockcoat was embossed with Crimean medals, and he was redolent of the odour of Whitehall. He received Hugh Ritson's papers with a curious mixture of easy courtesy and cold dignity—a sort of combination of the different manners in which he was wont to bow to a Secretary of State and condemn a convict to the chain and bread and water.

'The men are back to breakfast at nine,' he said. 'Watkins,' to the chief warder, 'have B 2001 brought round to the office immediately 34 gang returns.'

Hugh Ritson had left the receiving-office and was crossing the parade-ground when a loud hubbub arose near the lodge. 'The boat!' shouted twenty voices, and a covey of convicts ran in the direction of a shed where an eight-oar boat was kept on the chocks. 'A man has mizzled —— run a waggon into the sea and is drifting down the Race.'

How the demons laughed, how they cursed in jest, how they worked, how luminous were their eyes and haggard faces at the prospect of recapturing one of their fellow-prisoners who had tried to make his escape! Every convict who helped to catch a fugitive was entitled to the remission of six days. The doctor took Hugh Ritson up on to the lead flat that covered his quarters. From that altitude they could see over the prison wall to the rocky coast beyond. Near the ruins of the old church a gang of convicts were running to and fro, waving their hands, and shouting in wild excitement.

‘It’s gang 34,’ said the doctor, ‘Jim-the-ladder’s gang.’

The sun had risen, the sea was glistening in its million facets, and into many a rolling wave a sea-bird dipped its corded throat. In the silvery waterway there was something floating that looked as if it might have been a tub. It was the waggon that the convict had driven into the water for a boat.

‘It will sink—it’s shod with thick hoops of iron,’ said the doctor.

The convict could be seen standing in it. He had thrown off his coat and cap, and his sleeveless arms were bare to the armpits. The civil guard ran to the cliff head and fired. One shot hit. The man could be seen to tear the coarse linen shirt from his breast and bind it above the wrist.

‘Why does he not crouch down?’ said Hugh Ritson : he did not know who this convict was, but in his heart there was a feverish desire that the prisoner should escape.

‘He’s a doomed man—he’s in the Race—it’s flowing hard, and he’ll drift back to the island,’ said the doctor.

Half an hour later a posse of the civil guard, with two assistant-warders, brought the recaptured fugitive into the Governor’s receiving-office. The stalwart fellow strode between the warders with a firm step and head erect. He wore no jacket or cap, and on one bare arm a strip of linen was roughly tied. His breast was naked, his eyes were

aflame, and save for a black streak of blood across the cheek his face was ashy pale. But that man was not crushed by his misfortunes ; he seemed to crush them ; and never a victor in the hour of triumph was stronger than that disgraced and defeated convict in this moment of public shame.

‘Take that man’s number,’ said the Governor.

‘Ay, take it, and see you take it rightly,’ said the convict.

‘It’s B 2001,’ interposed the chief warden.

The Governor consulted a paper that lay on his table.

‘Send for the gentleman,’ he said to an attendant. ‘It’s well for you that you are wanted by the law-officers of the Crown,’ he added, turning to the prisoner.

The convict made no answer ; he was neither humble nor sullen ; his manner was frank but fierce, and made almost brutal by a sense of wrong.

The next moment Hugh Ritson stepped into the office. His eyes dropped, and his

infirm foot trailed heavily along the floor. He twitched at his coat with nervous fingers; his nostrils quivered; his whole body trembled perceptibly.

‘This is the man,’ said the chief warder, with a deferential bow.

Hugh Ritson tried to raise his eyes, but they fell suddenly. He opened his lips to speak, but the words would not come. And meantime the wet, soiled, naked, close-cropped, blood-stained convict, flanked by armed warders, stood before him with head erect and eyes that searched his soul. The convict rested one hand on his hip and pointed with the other at Hugh Ritson’s abject figure.

‘What does this man want with me?’ he said, and his voice was deep.

At that Hugh Ritson broke in impetuously:

‘Paul, I will not outrage your sufferings by offering you my pity.’

The officers looked into each other’s face.

‘I want none of your pity,’ said the convict bitterly.

‘No; it is I who need yours,’ said Hugh Ritson, in a low tone.

The convict laughed a hard laugh, and turned to the warders.

‘Here, take me away—I’ve had enough of this.’

‘Listen. I have something to say to you—something to do for you, too.’

The convict broke afresh into a laugh.

‘Take me away, will you?’

‘What if I say I am sorry for the past?’ said Hugh.

‘Then you are a hypocrite,’ the convict answered.

Hugh Ritson drew himself up, and took his breath audibly. In one swift instant his face became discoloured and his features pinched and hard. There was silence, and then in a low, broken tone, he said:

‘Paul, you know well what sort of man I am; don’t drive me too hard. I have come here to do you a service. Remember your sufferings—’

Once again the convict broke into a cold laugh.

‘Remember that others—one other—may be suffering with you.’

The convict’s haughty look fled like a flash of light.

‘Here, take me out of this,’ he muttered in a low hoarse voice. He took a step back, but the guard closed around him. ‘I won’t stand to listen to this man. Do you hear? I won’t listen,’ he said hotly; ‘he has come to torture me—that’s all.’

‘I have come to undo what I have done,’ said Hugh. ‘Paul, let me undo it. Don’t rouse the bad part of me at this crisis of your life and mine.’

The convict paused, and said more quietly :

‘Then it’s your policy to undo it. Such villainy as yours always punishes itself sooner or later.’

Hugh Ritson flinched. The words had gone to his heart like a spear. If he had dared to mask his motive, that thrust would have left it naked.

‘I will not wrong the truth by saying I am a changed man,’ he answered meekly.

‘My motive is my own ; but my act shall be all in all to you.’

The convict’s face lightened.

‘ You have used me for your vengeance,’ he said, ‘ you shall not use me for your contrition also. Guards, let me out, let me out, I tell you !’ He looked inexpressibly noble at that moment—a strong man braving the cruelties of penal servitude, and spurning the liberty that seemed to be bought by vice. The Governor interposed.

‘ When you leave this room you go direct to the cells.’

‘ Ay, take me to your cells, and let me lie there and die and rot,’ said the convict.

‘ Take him away,’ said the Governor.

‘ Paul, I beseech you to hear me,’ cried Hugh Ritson, amid the clanking of the arms of the guard.

‘ Take him away !’ the Governor shouted again.

An hour afterwards B 2001 was recalled to the receiving-office. He was quiet enough now.

‘ We have an order respecting you from

the Secretary of State,' said the Governor. ' You are required to give evidence at a trial. At two o'clock you leave Portland for Cumberland, and your guard goes with you.'

The convict bent his head and went out in silence.

CHAPTER XV.

PAUL RITSON—let him be known by his official number no more—was not taken to the punishment cells. He was set to work with the stone-dressing gang stationed near the gate of the prison. The news of his attempt to escape had not spread more rapidly than rumours of his approaching departure.

‘I say,’ shouted a hoary convict, ‘take a crooked message out?’

‘What’s your message?’

‘On’y a word to the old girl telling her where she’ll find a bunch of keys as she wants partic’lar.’

‘Write to her yourself, my man.’

‘What, and the Governor read it, and me get a bashing, and the crushers pinch the

old moll? Well, I *am* surprised at ye; but I forgot, you're a straight man, you are.'

A mocking laugh followed this explanatory speech.

A young fellow with a pale, meek face and the startled eyes of a hare crept close up to where Paul Ritson worked, and took a letter out of his pocket.

'This is the last I had from home,' he said quietly, and put the letter into Paul's hands.

It was a soiled and crumpled paper, so greasy from frequent handlings and so much worn by many foldings, that the writing could scarcely be deciphered. Home? It was dated from the Union of Liverpool, and had come from his invalid wife and his children, all living there.

The poor fellow could not read, but he had somehow learned the letter by heart, and was able to point out each bit of family history in the exact place where it was recorded. He had lost his class privileges, and was not allowed to reply; and now he wanted to know if Paul Ritson could get

down to Liverpool and see his wife and little ones, and tell them how well he was, and how lusty he looked, and what fine times he had of it—‘just to keep up their spirits, you know.’

‘I say, you sir,’ bawled a sinister gray-head—the same whose conversation was overheard in church—‘I hear as you’re a employer of labour when yer not lagged. Any chance? I wants to leave my sitivation. Long hours, and grub reg’lar on-satisfactory. Besides, my present employer insists on me wearing a collar with a number —same as a wild beast or a bobby. It’s gettin’ ridic’lous. So I’ve give notice, and I flit in September. Maybe ye see as I’m growing my wings to fly.’ The hoary sinner pointed upwards to his grizly hair, which was longer than the hair of his comrades. ‘On’y it’s coming out another tint o’ awrburn nor what it was ten years ago, and the old woman won’t have the same pride in my pussonal appearance.’

At two o’clock, the assistant-warder known as Jim-the-ladder marched Paul

Ritson to the chief warder's office. There the convict was handcuffed and the warder armed. Then they set out. On the steam-boat that plied between the Portland Ferry and Weymouth the convict dress attracted much attention. The day was some sort of chapel festival, and great numbers of chapel people in holiday costume crowded the decks and climbed the paddleboxes; the weather was brilliant; the sun danced on the waters like countless fairies on a floor of glass; a brass band played on the bridge.

Again at the Weymouth railway-station the people gathered in little groups, and looked askance at the convict. During the few minutes which elapsed before the train left the platform, a knot of spectators stood before the carriage and peered in at the window. Paul Ritson paid little heed to these attentions, but they were often unwelcome enough. ‘Keep clear of him—see the blue cap?’ ‘What an ill-looking fellow—to be sure his looks are enough to hang him.’ Paul laughed bitterly. His heart

felt cold within him at that moment. If he had worn broadcloth and a smile how different the popular verdict might have been. Who then would have said that he was a villain? Certainly not yonder sleek minister of Christ who was humming a psalm tune a moment ago, and paused to whisper, ‘Be sure your sin will find you out.’ The black-coated Pharisee was handing a lady into a first-class carriage.

The train started. Paul threw himself back in his seat, and thought of all that had occurred since he made this journey before. He was travelling in the other direction then, and what an agony was that first experience of convict life! He had never thought of it from that day to this. Other and more poignant memories had day after day obliterated the recollection of that experience. But it came back now as freshly as if it had all occurred yesterday. He was one of a gang of twenty who were travelling from Millbank to Dartmoor. The journey to Waterloo in the prison van had been a terrible ordeal. He had thought in the cells

that it would be nothing to him if people in the streets recognised him. The shameful punishment of an innocent man was not his, but the law's disgrace. Yet, when he was marched out into the prison grounds abreast of a cadaverous wretch with shrunken brows and the eyes of a hawk, an old thief in front of him, and a murderer convicted of manslaughter treading on his heels, the cold sweat burst in great beads from his forehead. He had meant to hold up his head, and if people looked into his face to look frankly back into their faces. But when his turn came he leapt into the van, and his chin buried itself in his breast. Then the crowds drawn up on the pavement outside as the gates rolled back and the van passed through ; the crush in a busy thoroughfare when the van stopped to let a line of crowded omnibuses go by ; the horrible scene at the station when the convicts were marched down the platform, and every ear was arrested by the tramp, tramp of twenty fettered men ! Above all, the jests and the laughter of the older hands

who had served their time before, and were superior to all small considerations of public shame! ‘I say, you with the gig-lamps, toss a poor devil a bit o’ ‘bacco.’ ‘Seen us afore? In coarse you have. You in the white choker, look hard while yer at it, and you’ll know us again.’ ‘Oh, Mother Shipton, and is that yourself? and how pleased we is to see ye, and just tip us yer welwet purse, and we’ll give it yer back when we’re this ways again.’ Paul Ritson could not forbear to laugh aloud when he remembered with what an agony of sweat he had that day crept back into his seat. Times had changed since then. He had spent a year and a half in a Government school, and had been educated out of all torturing delicacy.

The warder attempted to draw him into conversation. Jim-the-ladder repeatedly protested that he bore no malice. ‘I’m a good fellow at bottom,’ he said more than once, and Paul Ritson showed no malice. But he laughed bitterly at a grim and an obvious thought that the warder’s dubious

words suggested. Failing in his efforts at conciliation, the warder charged his pipe and relapsed into a long silence.

They had a compartment to themselves. At a station where the train stopped a man opened the door and had already put one foot into the carriage when he recognised the caste of his travelling companions. He disappeared in a twinkling. Paul Ritson did his best to restrain the anger that well-nigh choked him. He merely sent a ringing laugh after the retreating figure. At another station a police inspector, dressed in a little brief authority, caught sight of the blue cap and gray jacket, and hustled up to examine the warder's papers. Then, with a lofty look, he strode through the group of spectators whom his presence had attracted.

Arrived at Waterloo, the warder hailed a cab, and they drove to Scotland Yard to report themselves. There they supped on cocoa and brown bread, with the addition of a rasher of bacon and a pipe for the warder. Thence they were driven to

Euston to catch the nine o'clock train to Penrith.

The journey north was uneventful. At Rugby, Stafford, and elsewhere, the train stopped, and little groups of people looked in at the convict, and made apposite comments on his appearance, crime, and condition. Paul Ritson often shut his eyes and said nothing. Sometimes a sneer curled his lip, sometimes he burst into a bitter laugh. He was thinking that this was a fitting close to the degradation of his prison life. If one feeling of delicacy, one tender sentiment, one impulse of humanity remained to him when the gates of Portland closed behind him, it only required this cruel torture to crush it for ever.

The warder coiled himself up and fell asleep. It was after midnight when they reached Crewe, and from that point of the journey the worst of the torment ceased. The merciful fellow-men were mostly in their nightcaps, dreaming of heroic deeds that they were doing. But the silence of night had its own torture. As the train

rumbled on through the darkness, now rattling in a long tunnel, now sliding into open air like a boat into still water, Paul Ritson's mind went back to the day which seemed now to be so far away that it might have belonged to another existence, when he travelled this road with the dear soul who had trusted her young and cloudless life to his keeping. Where was she now ? Peace be with her, wheresoever she was ! He recalled her tenderest glance, he seemed to hear her softest tone ; the light pressure of her delicate fingers was now on his hands —the hard hands that wore the irons. And even at that moment, when all his soul went out to the pure young wife who had shared his sufferings, and he felt as if time and space were nothing, as if he had drawn her to him by the power of his yearning love, it seemed to him that all at once there rang in his ears the shrill sharp voices of the convicts rapping out their foul and frightful oaths.

He leapt to his feet, with a muttered oath on his own lips, and when the imagined

agony with which he surprised himself had given way to a new sense of his actual sufferings, his heart grew yet more cold and bitter. He thought of what he had been and of what he was. There could be no disguising the truth—he was a worse man. Yes ; whatsoever had once been pure in him, whatsoever had once been generous, whatsoever had once been of noble aspiration, was now impure, and ungenerous, and ignoble. Above all else, he had lost that tenderness which is the top and crown of a strong man. He felt as if the world had lifted its hand against him, and as if he were ready and eager to strike back.

They reached Penrith towards four in the morning, and then the carriage in which they travelled was shunted on to the branch line to await the first train towards Cocker-mouth. The day was breaking. From the window Paul Ritson could see vaguely the few ruins of the castle. That familiar object touched him strangely. He hardly knew why, but he felt that a hard lump at his heart melted away. By-and-by the

brakesman shouted to the signalman in the gray silence of morning. The words were indifferent—only some casual message—but they were spoken in the broad Cumbrian that for a year and a half had never once fallen on Paul Ritson's ear. Then the lump that had melted at his heart seemed to rise to his throat.

The gray light became intermingled with red, and soon the sky to the east was aflame. Paul let down the carriage window, and long waves of sweet mountain air, laden with the smell of peat, flowed in upon him. His lips parted and his breast expanded. At five o'clock the engine was attached. A few carriages were added at the platform, and these contained a number of pitmen, in their red-stained fustian, going down for the morning shift. When the train moved westward, the sun had risen, and all the air was musical with the songs of the birds. Very soon the train ran in among the mountains, and then at last the bitterness of Paul Ritson's heart seemed to fall away from him like a garment. That quick thrill of soul which

comes when the mountains are first seen after a long absence is a rapture known to the mountaineer alone. Paul saw his native hills towering up to the sky, the white mists flying off their bald crown, the torrents leaping down their brant sides, and the tears filled his eyes and blotted it all out. The sedge-warbler was singing with the wheatear, and, though he could not see them now, he knew where they were: the sedge-warbler was flitting among the rushes of the lowland mere; the wheatear was perched on the crevice of gray rock in which it had laid its pale blue eggs. The sheep were bleating on the fells, and he knew their haunts by the lea of the boulders and along the rocky ledges where grew the freshest grasses. Down the corries of Blencathra, long drifts of sheep were coming before the dogs, and he knew that the shepherds had been out on the fells during the short summer night, numbering the sheep for the washing in the beck below.

Everything came back upon him like a memory of yesterday. He stood up and

thrust out his head, and did not think of his gray jacket and blue cap until a carter who watered his horses at a pool near the railway lines started and stared as if he had seen a ‘boggle’ at noonday.

Then Paul Ritson remembered that he was still a convict, that his hands wore irons, that the man who lay sleeping on the seat of the carriage was his warder, and that the steely thing that peeped from the belt of the sleeping man was a revolver, to be promptly used if he attempted to escape.

But not even these reflections sufficed to dissipate the emotion that had taken hold of him. He began at length to think of Hugh Ritson, and to wonder why he had been brought back home. Home!—home? It was a melancholy home-coming, but it was coming home nevertheless.

CHAPTER XVI.

Two days later the gray old town hall that stands in the market-place of Keswick was surrounded by a busy throng. The Civil Court of the County Assize was sitting in this little place for the nonce to try a curious case of local interest. It was an action for ejectment brought by Greta, Mrs. Paul Ritson, against a defendant whose name was entered on the sheet as Paul Drayton, *alias* Paul Ritson, now of the Ghyll, in the parish of Newlands.

The court-room was crowded. It was a large bare room, with a long table and two rows of chairs crossing the end, the one row occupied by the two judges and a special jury, the other by the lawyers for prosecution and defence. The rest of the chamber

was not provided with seats, and there the dalespeople huddled together.

A seat had been found for Greta at one end of the table. Her cheek rested on her hand. She dropped her eyes as the spectators craned their necks to catch a glimpse of her. Behind her, and with one hand on her chair-back, stood the old parson, his jovial white head more white than of old, the tenderer lines in his mellow face drawn down to a look of pain. Immediately facing Greta, at the opposite end of the table, Hugh Ritson sat. One leg was thrown over the other knee, and the long nervous fingers of his right hand played with the shoe-lace. His head was inclined forward, and the thin, pallid, clean-cut face with the great calm eyes and the full, dilated nostrils was more than ever the face of a high-bred horse. None would have guessed the purpose with which Hugh Ritson sat there. One would have said that indifference was in those eyes and on that brow—indifference or despair.

Near where the rustle was loudest and

most frequent among the spectators, Drayton sat by the side of Mr. Bonnithorne. He was dressed in his favourite suit of broad plaid, and had a gigantic orange-lily stuck jauntily in his buttonhole. His face was flushed and his eyes sparkled. Now and again he leaned back to whisper something to the blacksmith, the miller, and the landlord of the Flying Horse, who were grouped behind him. His remarks must have been wondrously facetious, for they were promptly followed by a low gurgle, which was as promptly suppressed.

The lawyer for the plaintiff opened his case. The plaintiff sued as the owner in succession to her husband, who was at present dead to the law. She contended that the man who now stood seized of the Ghyll was not her husband, Paul Ritson, but Paul Drayton, an innkeeper of Hendon, who bore him a strange personal resemblance, and personated him. The evidence of identity which should presently be adduced was full and complete in the essential particular of proving that the defendant

was not Paul Ritson, by whose title alone the defence would maintain the right of present possession. Unhappily, the complementary evidence as to the actual identity of the defendant with Paul Drayton, the publican, had been seriously curtailed by the blindness, followed by the death, of an important witness. Still, if he, the counsel for the plaintiff, could prove to the satisfaction of the jury that the defendant was not the man he represented himself to be, they would have no course but to grant the ejectment for which the plaintiff asked. To this end he would call two witnesses whose evidence must outweigh that of all others—the wife of Paul Ritson, and the clergyman who solemnised the marriage.

Greta's name was called, and she rose at the end of the table. Her bosom heaved under the small lace shawl that covered her shoulders, and was knotted, like a sailor's scarf, on her breast. She stood erect, her eyes raised slightly and her drooping hands clasped in front. After the customary formalities, she was examined.

‘ You are the only child of the late Robert Lowther?’

‘ I am the daughter of Robert Lowther.’

Drayton threw back his head, and laughed a little.

‘ You were married to Paul Ritson in 1875 at the parish church of Newlands, the minister being Parson Christian?’

‘ I was.’

‘ On the day of your marriage you accompanied your husband to London, and the same night he left you at the Convent of St. Margaret, Westminster?’

‘ That is quite true.’

There was a buzz of conversation in the court, accompanied by a whispered conference on the bench. The lawyer paused to say that it was not a part of his purpose to trouble the court with an explanation of facts which were so extraordinary that they could only be credited on the oath of a person who, though present, would not be called. At this reference Hugh Ritson raised his languid eyes, and the examination proceeded.

‘Three days afterwards you received a message from your husband, requesting you to meet him at St. Pancras Station, and return with him to Cumberland by the midnight train?’

‘I did.’

‘Who took you the message?’

‘Mrs. Drayton, the old person at the inn at Hendon.’

‘You went to the station?’

‘Oh yes.’

‘Tell the court what occurred there.’

‘Just on the stroke of twelve, when the train was about to leave, a man whom at first sight I mistook for my husband came hurrying up the platform, and I stepped into the carriage with him.’

‘Do you see that man in court?’

‘Yes; he sits two seats to your right.’

Drayton rose, smiled broadly, bowed to the witness, and resumed his seat.

‘Were you alone in the compartment?’

‘At first we were; but just as the train was moving away who should join us but Parson Christian.’

There was another buzz of conversation, and the lawyer paused again to say that he should not trouble the court with an explanation of the extraordinary circumstances by which Parson Christian came to be in London at that critical moment. These facts formed in themselves a chain of evidence which must yet come before a criminal court, involving as it did the story of a conspiracy more painful and unnatural perhaps than could be found in the annals of jurisprudence.

‘Tell the court what passed in the train.’

‘I perceived at once that the man was not my husband, though strangely like him in face and figure, and when he addressed me as his wife I repulsed him.’

‘Did Parson Christian also realize the mistake?’

‘Oh yes, but not quite so quickly.’

‘What did you do?’

‘We left the train at the first station at which it stopped.’

‘Did the defendant offer any resistance?’

‘No; he looked abashed, and merely observed that perhaps a recent illness had altered him.’

Mr. Bonnithorne, as lawyer for the defence, so far advanced in his profession as to be able to plead in the superior courts, cross-examined the witness.

‘You say that on the night following the morning of your marriage your husband left you at a convent?’

‘I do.’

Mr. Bonnithorne dropped his twinkling eyes, and muttered something that was inaudible to the witness. There was a titter among the people who stood behind him.

‘And you say that Mrs. Drayton took you the message of which you have spoken. Did she tell you that your husband had been ill?’

‘She did.’

‘We are to infer that you visited the house of the Draytons at Hendon?’

‘A railway accident drove us there.’

‘Did anyone accompany the defendant to St. Pancras that night?’

‘ My husband’s brother, Mr. Hugh Ritson, was with him.’

‘ Tell the jury where your husband now is, if he is not at this moment in court.’

No answer. Amid a profound silence the plaintiff’s lawyer was understood to object to the question.

‘ Well, we can afford to waive it,’ said Mr. Bonnithorne, with a superior smile. ‘ One further question, Mrs. Ritson. Had you any misunderstanding with your husband?’

‘ None whatever.’

‘ Will you swear that your voices were not raised in angry dispute while you were at the inn at Hendon?’

Greta lifted her head and her eyes flashed. ‘ Yes, I will swear it,’ she said in a soft voice but with impressive emphasis.

Mr. Bonnithorne was understood to say that perhaps the point was too delicate to be pressed.

Parson Christian was next examined. The defendant in the present action was not the man whom he married to the plaintiff.

He had since seen Paul Ritson. Where? In the convict prison of Dartmoor. In cross-examination he was asked by what name the convict was known to the directors of Dartmoor. Paul Drayton.

‘Then tell the court how you came to identify the defendant as Drayton.’

‘There were many facts pointing that way.’

‘Give us one.’

‘On the morning of the marriage I found a letter lying open before the fire in my vestry. It was from Mr. Hugh Ritson to Mr. Bonnithorne, and it mentioned the name of Drayton in a connection which, by the light of later revelations, provoked many inferences.’

Mr. Bonnithorne was unprepared for this answer. He glanced down and coloured deeply.

‘Can you show us the letter?’

‘No, I left it where I found it.’

‘Then it can hardly be received as evidence.’

The lawyer smiled, and the tension of

Drayton's face relaxed. There was a slight shuffle among the people ; the witness had stepped back.

Mr. Bonnithorne opened his case. They were asked to believe that the defendant in the present action was Paul Drayton, in the teeth of the fact that Paul Drayton was at that moment a convict in a convict prison. Odd, wasn't it ? The incredible statement was made that a newly-married husband had placed his young wife in a convent on the night of their marriage, and that when they should have rejoined each other an interchange had been made, the husband going to prison in another man's name, the other man coming to Cumberland to claim the place of the woman's husband. Moreover, they were asked to believe that the husband's brother, Mr. Hugh Ritson, had either been fooled by the impostor or made a party to the imposture. Happily it was easy to establish identity by two unquestionable chains of evidence—resemblance and memory. It would be shown that the defendant could be none other than Paul

Ritson, first, because he resembled him exactly in person ; second, because he knew all that Paul Ritson ought to know ; third, because he knew nothing that Paul Ritson might not know. No two men's lives had ever been the same from the beginning of the world, and as it would be seen that the defendant's life had been the same as Paul Ritson's, it followed that Paul Ritson and the defendant were one and the same man.

Dick o' the Syke was the first witness examined for the defence. He swore that Paul Ritson was active in extinguishing a fire that broke out in the mill two years ago ; that he had climbed to the crosstrees with a hatchet ; and that within the past month the defendant had described to him the precise locality and shape of the gap made in the roof by the fire. No one could have known so much except himself and the man who stood on the crosstrees. That man was Paul Ritson, and he was there and then recognised by many spectators, among whom was Parson Christian.

The next witness was Mistress Calvert,

of the Pack Horse. Paul Ritson had slept at their house one night two years ago, and a few days since the present defendant had pointed out the bedroom he occupied, and recalled the few words of conversation which passed between them.

Natt, the stableman, was called. His sleepy eyes blinked knowingly as he explained that one winter's night, when the snow fell heavily, Mrs. Ritson, then Miss Greta, was startled by what she mistook for the ghost of Mr. Paul Ritson. The witness had not been so easily deceived, and the defendant had since described to him the exact scene and circumstances of what the lady had thought to be the ghostly appearance.

Then followed John Proudfoot, the blacksmith ; Tom o' Dint, the postman ; Giles Raisley, the pitman ; Job Sheepshanks, the mason ; and Tommy Lowthwaite, the landlord of the Flying Horse—all swearing to points of identity.

One recalled the fact that Paul Ritson had a scar on his head that was caused by

the kick of a horse when he was a boy. The defendant had just such a scar.

Another remembered that Paul Ritson had a mark on the sole of his right foot which had been made by treading on a sharp piece of rock on Hindscarth. The defendant had exactly such a mark.

A third had wrestled with Paul Ritson, and knew that he had a mole beneath the left shoulder-blade on the back. The defendant had a mole in that unusual place.

The lawyer for the defence smiled blandly at the special jury, the special jury smiled blandly at the lawyer for the defence. Was it really necessary that the defendant should be called? Surely it was a pity to occupy the time of the court. The whole case was in a nutshell—the lady had quarrelled with her husband. Odd, wasn't it? State of affairs would be promptly gauged when it was explained that this action had been raised to anticipate a forthcoming suit in the divorce court for restitution of connubial rights.

The counsel for the plaintiff smiled also,

and his was a weak smile of conscious defeat. He stammered a desire to withdraw—said he had been promised more conclusive evidence when he undertook the case, and sat down with an apologetic air.

There was a shuffle of feet in the court. Drayton had risen to receive the congratulation of his friends behind him and the cordial nods of some of the superior people who had been favoured with seats at the right and left of the judges. He was answering in a loud tone, when there was a sudden lull of the buzz of gossip, and all eyes were directed towards one end of the table.

Hugh Ritson had risen from his seat, and was addressing the court. His face was pale but as firm as a rock, and his voice was full and strong.

‘If it is conceivable,’ he said, ‘that in any question of personal identity the court will accept the evidence of all the tinkers and tailors, the riff-raff, and the raggabash of the country side, and reject that of the wife of the man whose estate is in question,

perhaps it will be allowed that there are three persons who are essential to this examination—myself, as brother of Paul Ritson ; the defendant, who claims to be Paul Ritson ; and the convict who is suffering penal servitude in the name of Paul Drayton. I might name one other whose evidence would be yet more conclusive than that of any of these alone, the mother of Paul Ritson ; but she is unhappily dead to the world.'

He spoke quietly, and was heard in silence, and without protest. Drayton was still on his feet, riveted to the spot where he stood. In all his calculations this chance had never once suggested itself—that Hugh Ritson would risk the personal danger to bring him down.

Hugh Ritson asked the court to be pardoned the informality of putting two questions to the defendant. Drayton had recovered his consciousness and lost his temper by this time. He protested vehemently that nothing would prevail with him to answer questions of Hugh Ritson's.

'None of his criss-crossin' for me,' he shouted.

'You prejudice your case by not putting the defendant in the witness-box,' said one of the jurors to Mr. Bonnithorne.

The lawyer for the plaintiff rose. His professional pride had been piqued by Hugh Ritson's interruption. He did not require that Mr. Brown, Mr. Jones, or Mr. Robinson should instruct him how to conduct his case. Nor was the plaintiff eager for dubious assistance from such a quarter.

Hugh Ritson seemed not to be conscious of these remarks. He addressed the judges again, saying that it was of course within the liberties of the defendant to keep carefully out of the witness-box, but the bench would not refuse to hear the evidence of the two other persons of whom he had spoken, himself and the convict known as Drayton.

At this there was high commotion in the court. Greta had leaned back in her chair, her bosom heaving, her face shadowed by lines of pain. Parson Christian stood behind her with a blank expression of bewil-

derment. Drayton's brows were tightened and his teeth were exposed between his hard-drawn lips.

Hugh Ritson stood quietly by the table, and with complete self-possession explained that four days ago, in anticipation of this action and of another that had been threatened, he had made a statutory declaration in the presence of the Home Secretary and the law-officers of the Crown. The first result of that statement was that the convict Drayton was now present in the court-house ready to appear at this trial.

There was an awful silence as he spoke. The judges signified their desire that the convict might be brought in and heard. Hugh Ritson motioned to a tall man who stood near, and immediately afterwards a door was thrown open and another man stepped into the court-room.

Every eye was fixed upon him. He wore a convict's gray jacket, with the round badge marked '3. B 2001. P S,' and the broad arrow beneath. His face was pale and rigid ; his large eyes glittered ; he was in

his full manhood, but his close-cropped hair was slightly tinged with gray. He pushed his way through the people, who fell back to let him pass. When he reached the table he tapped it impatiently with one of his hands, which were fettered, and threw up his head with a glance of defiance. His whole bearing was that of a strong man who believed that every man's hand was against him, and who intended to let it be seen that his own hand was against every man's.

Hugh Ritson rose again, and he did not now consult the formalities of the court, nor did the judges object to his irregularities.

'John Proudfoot, Job Sheepshanks, Thomas Lowthwaite, Giles Raisley, look this way,' he cried. 'Who is this man?'

There was a dead hush. Then, one by one, the men who had been named shook their heads. They did not know the convict. Indeed, he was terribly altered. The ordeal of the past two years had ploughed strange lines in his face. At that

moment he was less like himself than was the impostor who came there to personate him.

Hugh Ritson's manner did not change. Only a slight curl of the lip betrayed his feelings.

'Is there anyone in court who remembers him?'

Not a voice responded. All was silence.

'Will the defendant stand side by side with him?'

Drayton leapt up with a boisterous laugh, and swaggered his way to the opposite side of the table. As he approached, the convict looked at him keenly.

'Will Mrs. Ritson come forward again?' said Hugh Ritson, and his voice deepened as he spoke.

Greta had already risen, and was holding Parson Christian's hand with a nervous grip. She stepped apart, and, going behind the two men, she came to a stand between them. On the one side stood Drayton, with a smirking face half-turned towards the spectators ; on the other stood the convict, his hands bound before him, his

defiant glance softened to a look of tenderness, and his lips parted with the unuttered cry that was ready to burst from them.

‘Greta,’ said Hugh Ritson, in a tone of indescribable pathos, ‘which of these men is your husband?’

Greta had slowly raised her eyes from the ground until they reached the convict’s face. Then in an instant, in a flash of light, with the quick cry of a startled bird, she flung herself on his neck. Her fair head dropped on the frieze of the convict’s jacket, and her sobs were all that broke the silence.

Hugh Ritson’s emotion surged in his throat, but he stood quietly at the table. Only his slight figure swayed a little and his face quivered. His work was not yet done.

‘This is the answer of nature,’ he said. ‘The convict is Paul Ritson; the defendant in the present action is an impostor personating him.’

Mr. Bonnithorne had seemed to be stunned. Recovering himself, he tried to smile, and said :

‘After this melodramatic interlude, per-

haps I may be allowed to ask our voluntary witness and counsel a few questions?’

Hugh Ritson bowed, and the clerk of the court administered the oath to him.

‘Did you at the Central Criminal Court held at the Old Bailey in 1875 swear that the person who stands here in the dress of a convict was *not* Paul Ritson?’

‘I did.’

‘Odd, isn’t it? Now for my second question. Did you also swear that the defendant was your brother, and therefore not Paul Drayton?’

‘I did.’

‘Then you were guilty of perjury at that time, or you are guilty of perjury now?’

‘I was guilty of perjury *then*.’

A judge interposed and asked if the witness was awakened to the enormity of the crime to which he confessed. Hugh Ritson bent his head.

‘Are you conscious that you are rendering yourself liable to penal servitude?’

‘I have signed a declaration of my guilt.’

The answers were given in perfect calmness, but a vein of pathos ran through every word.

‘Do you know that a few years back many a poor wretch whose crime was trifling compared with yours has gone from the dock to the gallows?’

‘My guilt is unmitigated guilt. I make a voluntary statement. I am not here to appeal for mercy.’

There was the hush of awe in the court. The face of the convict wore an expression of amazement.

Mr. Bonnithorne smiled again.

‘I presume you know that the effect of the law-officers of the Crown believing the story that you tell us now is that, if they do so, the man whom you call your brother will be put into possession of the estate of which your late father died seized?’

‘He is entitled to it.’

Mr. Bonnithorne turned to the jury with a smile of triumph.

‘It is always necessary to find some standard by which to judge of human actions. The witness quarrelled with the

defendant four days ago, and this is his revenge. But I appeal to the court. Is this story credible? Is it not a palpable imposture?

The judge again interposed.

'Men do not risk so much for a lie. The witness knows that when the court rises the sheriff may take him into custody.'

At this the lawyers for plaintiff and defendant rose together, and asked the bench not to play into the hands of the witness by apprehending him.

Hugh Ritson smiled coldly. Strange climax—a man self-condemned and defended from the rigours of the law both by those whose friend he would be and those who would be his enemies!

'Let the convict be examined,' said one of the judges.

Paul Ritson raised his head; Greta sank into a chair beneath him. He was not sworn. The warder in charge put in an entry from the books of the prison. It ran, 'Paul Drayton, five feet eleven inches, brown hair and eyes, age thirty, licensed

victualler, born in London, convicted of robbery at the scene of a railway accident.'

'Does that entry properly describe you?' asked the judge.

The convict's eyes wandered.

'What's going on?' he said, in a tone of bewilderment.

'Attend, my man. Are you Paul Ritson, the eldest son of the late Allan Ritson?'

'Why do you want to know?' said the convict.

'It befits a witness who is permitted to come from the scene of a degrading punishment to give a prompt and decisive answer. What is your name, sir?'

'Find it out.'

The other judge intervened.

'My man,' he said suavely, 'we sit here in the name of the law, and the law could wish to stand your friend.' (The convict laughed bitterly.) 'Pray help us to a decision in the present perplexing case by a few frank answers. If you are Paul Drayton you go back to Portland to complete the term of your imprisonment. If it can be

proved that you are Paul Ritson, your case will be laid before the Home officials, with the result that you will be liberated and re-established in your estate. First of all, which is your name, Paul Drayton or Paul Ritson ?'

The convict did not answer at first. Then he said in a low tone :

' No law can re-establish me.'

The judge added : ' Bethink you, if you are Paul Ritson, and an innocent man, the law can restore you to your young wife.'

Visibly moved by this reference, the convict's eyes wandered to where Greta sat beside him, and the tension of his gaze relaxed.

The judge began again :

' You have been recognised by two witnesses—one claiming to be your brother, the other to be your wife—as Paul Ritson. Are you that person ?'

The convict's face showed the agony he suffered. In a vague, uncertain, puzzled way he was thinking of the consequences of his answer. If he said he was Paul Ritson, it seemed to him that it must

eke out that he was not the eldest legitimate son of his father. Then all the fabric of his mother's honour would there and then tumble to the ground. He recalled his oath ; could he pronounce six words and not violate it ? No, not six syllables. How those mouthing gossips would glory to see a good name trailed in the dust !

'Are you Paul Ritson, the eldest son and the heir of Allan Ritson ?'

The convict looked again at Greta. She rose to her feet beside him. All her soul was in her face, and cried, 'Answer, answer !'

'I cannot answer,' said the convict, in a loud piercing voice. At that terrible moment his strength seemed to leave him. He sank backward into the chair from which Greta had risen.

She stood over him and put her hand tenderly on his head.

'Tell them it is true,' she pleaded ; 'tell them you are my husband ; tell them so ; oh, tell them, tell them,' she cried in a tone of piteous supplication. He raised to hers

his weary eyes with a dumb cry for mercy from the appeal of love.

Only Hugh Ritson of all who were there present understood what was in the convict's heart.

' Paul Ritson is the rightful heir of his father and his mother's legitimate son,' he muttered audibly.

The convict turned to where his brother sat, and looked at him with a face that seemed to grapple for the missing links of a chain of facts.

Bonnithorne rose.

' It will be seen that the unhappy convict-witness will not be used as an instrument of deception. Odd, isn't it?' he said. ' He is Paul Drayton, and cannot be made to pretend that he is Paul Ritson.'

The hush of awe in the court was broken by the opening of a door behind the bench. Two women stood on the threshold. One of them was small, wrinkled, and old. She was Mrs. Drayton. The other was a nun in hood and cape. She was Sister Grace.

' The witness I spoke of as dead to the

world is now present in the court,' said Hugh Ritson.

Amid a buzz of conversation the nun was handed to the table. She raised her long veil and showed a calm pale face. After the usual formalities, one of the judges addressed her.

'Mrs. Ritson,' he said, 'tell us which of the two men who sit opposite is your son.'

Sister Grace answered in a clear, soft voice:

'Both are my sons. The convict is Paul Ritson, my son by Allan Ritson ; the other is Paul Lowther, my son by an unhappy alliance with Robert Lowther.'

Drayton jumped to his feet.

'There, that's enough of this,' he shouted excitedly. 'Damme, if I can stand any more of it.'

Bonnithorne reached over and whispered, 'Madman, what are you doing ? Hold your tongue.'

'It's all up. There's the old woman, too, come to give me away. Here, I say, I'm Paul Drayton ; that's what I am, if you want to know.'

'Let the sheriff take that man before a justice of the peace,' said the judge.

'It was *you* that led me into this mess,' shouted Drayton at Bonnithorne. 'Only for you I would have been in Australia by this time.'

'Let the sheriff apprehend Mr. Bonnithorne also,' said the judge. 'As for you, sir,' he continued, turning to Hugh Ritson, 'I will report your evidence to the Public Prosecutor—who must be in possession of your statutory declaration—and leave the law-officers to take their own course with regard to you.'

Drayton and Bonnithorne did not trouble the world much longer. Within a month they were tried and condemned together—the one for personation; both for conspiracy.

Paul Ritson was removed in charge of his warder, to be confined in the town gaol pending the arrival of instructions from the Secretary of State. Hugh Ritson walked out of the court-room a free man.

CHAPTER XVII.

HUGH RITSON returned to his room on the pit brow. On his way there he passed a group of people congregated on the bridge at the town end. They fell apart as he walked through, but not an eye was raised to his, and not one glance of recognition came from his stony face. Towards the middle of the afternoon a solicitor came from Carlisle and executed a bill of sale on the machinery and general plant. The same evening, as the men on the day shift came up the shaft and those on the night shift were about to go below, the wages were paid down to the last weights taken at the pit mouth. Then Hugh Ritson closed his doors and began afresh his melancholy perambulation of the room.

That night—it was Wednesday night—as darkness fell on the mountain and moorland, there was a great outcry in the Vale. It started at the pit mouth, and was taken up on every side. In less than a quarter of an hour a hundred people—men, women, and children — were gathered about the head of the shaft. There had been a run of sand in the pit, and some of the hands were imprisoned in the blocked-up workings. Cries, moans, and the many sounds of weeping arose on the air in one dismal chorus. ‘I knew it would come ;’ ‘ I telt the master lang ago ;’ ‘ Where’s my man ?’ ‘ And mine ?’ ‘ And my poor barn—no’but fifteen.’ ‘ Anybody seen my Willie ?’ ‘ Is that thee, Robbie, ma lad?—no.’ As every cageful of men and boys came to the surface, there was a rush of mothers, wives, and fathers to recognise their own.

Hugh Ritson went out, and pushed his way through the people. ‘ Where is the sand running ?’ he asked of a pitman just landed.

‘ In the sandy vein, 2, 3, 1,’ answered the man.

‘Then the shaft is clear?’

‘Ay, but the water’s blocked in the main working, and it’s not safe to go down.’

Hugh Ritson had taken the man’s candle out of his hand, and was fixing it with the putty in the front of his own hat.

‘Are you ready?’ he shouted to the engine-man, above the babel of voices.

In another moment he had stepped into the cage and loopt down the iron rail in front of it. There was a moment’s silence among the panic-stricken people as the cage began to move downwards.

At the bottom of the shaft a group of men waited to ascend. Their faces were lurid in the dim light. Before the cage grounded Hugh Ritson could hear their breathing. ‘How many of you are left?’ he asked.

‘No’but two now—Giles Raisley and auld Reuben,’ answered one of the men. The others, without heeding the master’s question, had scrambled into the cage, and were already knocking the signal for the ascent.

Hugh Ritson turned towards the working known among the men as the sandy vein.

The cage was now rising, and the pitman who had spoken found himself left on the pit bottom ; the single moment that he had given to the master had lost him his chance of a place. He cast one stern glance upwards, and a muttered oath was on his lips. At the next instant he had taken the direction followed by Hugh Ritson, and was walking one pace behind him.

In the silence the dull thud of their footsteps on the rock beneath mingled with the drip, drip of the water overhead. When they had gone a hundred yards down the narrow working there came another and far more terrible sound. It was such a sound as the sea might have made if it had rushed through a thousand crevices in the rock. It was the sound of the thousands of tons of sand, as they forced their way from the dense mass above. And over the hiss as of the sea was the harsh crack of great timbers splitting like matchwood.

Towards the awful scene of this tumult Hugh Ritson quickened his steps. The man followed close at his heels. Presently their

passage was blocked with sand like a wall. Then over their heads the crosstrees cracked, and the upright forks split and bent at the right and left of them. In another moment the ground beneath them shook under the new weight that lay on it. They stepped quickly back, and in an instant, with a groan such as the sea makes when it is sucked by the ebbing tide from a cave in a rock, the floor, with all its freight, went down a score of feet. It had fallen to an old working that lay below.

Then the bent forks hung from the roof in empty air. Silence followed this shock, and through the silence there came a feeble cry for help. Hugh Ritson stepped out, plucked his candle from his hat, and held it before his feet. ‘Where are you?’ he called, and his voice came back through the echoing depths beyond. Presently a man could be dimly seen clinging to a cross-piece in an alcove made for an air-shaft from the main working. To get to him the treacherous ground must be crossed, with its cracking roof, through which the sand slid even yet,

and under the split timbers that still creaked. Hugh Ritson did not hesitate ; he turned to leap down, saying, ‘Follow me.’ But the man clung to him from behind.

‘For God’s sake dunnot,’ he cried. ‘I cannot go there. It’s mair nor my life is worth.’

Hugh Ritson twisted about, and looked him steadily in the face: ‘What is your name, my man ?’

‘Davey Braithwaite.’

‘Then you are the young fellow whose wife died last week ?’

‘Ey,’ with a drooping head.

‘Your child died before her, did it not?’

‘Ey, he did, poor laal thing.’

‘Your father and mother are gone too ?’

‘They’re gone for sure !’

‘And you’ve neither kith nor kin left in all the world ?’

‘Nay, no’but mysel’ left.’

Hugh Ritson said no more ; a hard smile played on his white face, and at the next instant he had leapt down on to the bed of sand below. The man recoiled a pace or

two and wrung his hands. Before he was aware of what had happened, Giles Raisley and the master were standing beside him.

‘Where were old Reuben and his gang stationed?’ said Hugh Ritson.

‘In the main working ; but the water is dammed up ; we can never pass.’

They returned to the shaft bottom, and walked thence down the cutting that ran from it at right angles. A light burned far away in the dim vista of that long dark burrowing. It was a candle stuck to the rock. The men who worked by it had left it there when they rushed off for their lives. Through the bottom of this working there ran a deep trough, but it was now dry. This was the channel by which the whole pit was drained. Beyond the light the three men encountered another wall of sand, and from behind it and through it there came to them the dull thud and theplash of heavy water.

‘If auld Reuben’s theer, he’s a dead man,’ said Giles Raisley, and he turned to go.

Hugh Ritson had struggled to the top of the heap, and was ploughing the sand away

from the roof with his hands. In a little while he had forced an opening, and could see into the dark space beyond. The water had risen to a reservoir of several feet deep. But it was still four or five feet from the roof, and over the black, surging bubbling waves the imprisoned miner could be seen clinging to a ledge of rock. Half his body was already immersed. When the candle shot its streak of light through the aperture of sand, the poor creature uttered a feeble cry. In another moment the master had wormed his body through the hole and dropped slowly into the water. Wading breast deep he reached the pitman, gave him his hand, and brought him safely through the closing seam.

When the cage rose to the surface again, bringing back to life and the world the last of the imprisoned miners, a great cheer broke from many a lusty throat. Women who had never thought to bless the master blessed him now with fervent tongues. Men who had thought little of the courage that could rest in that slight figure fell

aside at the sense of their own cowardice. Under the red glow that came from the engine fire many a hard face melted.

Hugh Ritson saw little of this, and heeded it not at all. He plucked the candle, still burning, from his hat, and threw it aside. Then he walked through the people towards his room, and when he got there he shut the door, almost slamming it in the faces of those who followed. He pulled down the window-blinds, and began afresh his perambulation to and fro.

He had grown paler and thinner. There was a sombre light in his eyes, and his lips were whitening. His step, once quick and sure, despite his infirmity, was now less certain. He had not slept since the night of Mercy's death. Determined never to encounter again the pains and terrors of sleep, he had walked through the long hours of the four succeeding nights. He knew what the result must be, and did not shrink from it. Once only he had thought of a quicker way to the sure goal that was before him. Then he had opened a cup-

board, and looked long and intently at a bottle that he took from its shelf. But he had put the bottle back. Why should he play the fool and leap the life to come? Thus night after night he had walked and walked, never resting, never pausing, though the enfeebled limbs shook beneath him, and the four walls of the room reeled in his dazed eyes.

Before returning to their homes the people gathered in the darkness about the office on the pit brow and gave one last cheer.

The master heard them and his lip curled. ‘Simpletons—they don’t understand,’ he muttered beneath his breath, and continued his melancholy walk.

Next morning a banksman, who acted as personal attendant on Hugh Ritson, brought him his breakfast. It was not early. The sun had risen, but the blinds of the office were still drawn, and a candle burned on the table. The man would have put out the candle and let in the sunlight, but the master forbade him. He was a Methodist,

and hummed psalm tunes as he went about his work. This morning he was more than usually fresh and happy when he entered with his tray ; but at the sight of Hugh Ritson's pallid face his own face saddened.

' You are a young man yet, Luke,' said the master. ' Let me see, how old are you ?'

' Seventy-nine, sir. I was born in ninety-eight. That was when auld Bonnyprat was agate of us and Nelson bashed him up.'

' I dare say you have grandchildren by this time ?'

' Bless you ey, and great-grandchilder, and ten of them, too ; and all well and hearty, thank the Lord.'

The sound of a bell, slowly tolling, came from across the dale. Hugh Ritson's face contracted, and his eyes fell.

' What bell is that ?' he asked, in an altered tone.

' It's like to be the church bell. They're burying poor auld Mattha's lass and her wee barn this morning.'

Hugh Ritson did not touch his breakfast.

‘Luke, close the shutters,’ he said, ‘and bring more candles.’

He did not go out that day, but continued to walk to and fro in the darkened room. Towards nightfall he grew feverish, and rang frequently the bell that summoned the banksman. He had only some casual order, some message, some unimportant explanation.

At length the old man understood his purpose, and settled himself there for the night. They talked much during the early hours, and often the master laughed and jested. But the atmosphere that is breathed by a sleepless man is always heavy with sleep, and, in spite of his efforts to keep awake, Luke dozed away in his chair. Then for hours there was a gloomy silence, broken only by the monotonous footfall within and the throb of the engine without.

The next day, Friday, the sun shone brilliantly, but the shutters of the little house on the pit brow remained closed, and the candle still burned on the table. Hugh Ritson had grown perceptibly feebler, yet

he continued his dreary walk. The old banksman was forbidden to send for a doctor, but he contrived to despatch a messenger for Parson Christian. That night he watched with the master again. When the conversation failed, he sang. First, a psalm of David, ‘The fool hath said in his heart there is no God;’ then a revival hymn of Charles Wesley about ransom by Christ’s blood.

It would have been a strange spectacle to strange eyes. The old man—young still though seventy-nine, dear to troops of dear ones, encircled in his age by love and honour, living in poverty that was abundance, with faith that was itself the substance of things hoped for, his simple face ruddier and mellower than before—rocking his head and singing in the singleness of his heart. The other man—barely thirty yet already old, having missed his youth, his thin cheeks pallid as linen, his eyes burning with a sombre light—alone in the world, desolate, apart—walking with an uncertain step and a tremor of the whole frame, which seemed to lurch for poise and

balance, yet swinging his arms with the sweep of the melody, and smiling a forced smile through his hard and whitened lips.

When the singing ceased, Hugh Ritson paused suddenly and turned to the old banksman.

‘Luke,’ he said abruptly, ‘I suppose there will be many to follow you when your time comes?’

‘Ey, please God,’ answered the banksman, dashing away a furtive drop that had rolled on to his cheek; ‘there’ll be my childer, and my childer’s childer, and their childer forby. Maybe the barns will lay me behind the mother; poor auld body!’

Hugh Ritson’s face darkened and he resumed his walk; ‘Tut, what matter?’ he asked himself, ‘the night winds are enough to moan over a man’s grave.’ And he laughed a little.

Next morning—Saturday morning—he wrote a letter, and sent Luke to the village to post it. Then he attended to some business relating to the pit. After that, he shut the door and bolted it. When the

old man brought the midday meal he knocked in vain, and had to go away.

Night closed in, and still there came no answer to the old man's knock. When the sun had set the wind had risen. It threatened to be a tempestuous night.

Towards ten o'clock Parson Christian arrived. He had wrestled long with his own heart as to what course it was his duty to take. He had come at last in answer to the banksman's summons, and now he knocked at the door. There was no answer. The wind was loud in the trees overhead, but he could hear the restless footfall within. He knocked again, and yet again. Then the bolt was drawn, and a voice at once strange and familiar cried, 'Come in, Parson Christian.' He had not called or spoken.

The Parson entered. When his eyes fell on Hugh Ritson's face, he shuddered as he had never shuddered before. Many a time he had seen death in a living face, but never anything like this. The livid cheeks were stony, the white lips were drawn hard, the

sombre eyes burned like a deep, slow fire, the yellow hands were gaunt and restless. There was despair on the contracted brow, but no repentance. And the enfeebled limbs trembled, but still shuffled on. On, on, on, through their longer journey than from Gabbatha to Golgotha. The very atmosphere of the room breathed of death.

‘Let me pray with you,’ said the Parson softly, and without any other words he went down on his knees.

‘Ay, pray for me, pray for me ; but you lose your labour ; nothing can save me.’

‘Let us call on God,’ said the Parson.

A bitter laugh broke from Hugh Ritson’s lips. ‘What ! and take to Him the dregs and rinsings of my life ? No.’

‘The blood of Christ has ransomed the world. It can save the worst sinner of us all, and turn away the heavy wrath of God.’

Hugh Ritson broke again into a bitter laugh.

‘The end has come of sin as of trouble. No matter.’ Then, with an awful solemnity, he added, ‘My soul is barren. It is already

given over to the undying worm. I shall die to-morrow at sunrise.'

'No man knows the day nor the hour—'

Hugh Ritson repeated, with a fearful emphasis, 'I shall die as the sun rises on Sunday morning.'

Parson Christian remained with him the weary night through. The wind moaned and howled outside. It licked the walls as with the tongues of serpents. The Parson prayed fervently, but Hugh Ritson's voice never once rose with his. To and fro, to and fro the dying man continued his direful walk. At one moment he paused and said with a ghastly smile, 'This dying is an old story. It has been going on every day for six thousand years, yet we find it as terrible as ever.'

Towards three in the morning he threw open the shutters. The windows were still dark; it seemed as if the dawn were far away. 'It is coming,' he said calmly. 'I knew it must come soon. Let us go out to meet it.'

With infinite effort he pulled his ulster over his shoulders, put on his hat, and opened the door.

‘Where are you going?’ said the Parson, and his voice broke.

‘To the top of the fell.’

‘Why there?’

Hugh Ritson turned his heavy eyes upon him. ‘To see the new day dawn,’ he said, with an awful pathos.

He had already stepped out into the gloom. Parson Christian followed him. They took the path that led through the moor end to the foot of Cat Bells. The old man offered his arm, but Hugh Ritson shook his head and walked one pace ahead. It was a terrible journey. The wind had dropped. In the air the night and day commingled. The dying man struggled along with the firm soul of a stricken lion. Step by step and with painful labour they ascended the bare side of the fell in the gray light of morning. They reached the top at last.

Below them the moorland lay dark and mute. The mist was around them. They

seemed to stand on an islet of the clouds. In front the daybreak was bursting the confines of bleak racks of cloud. Then the day came in its wondrous radiance, and flooded the world in a vast ocean of light.

On the mountain brow Hugh Ritson resumed his melancholy walk. The old Parson muttered, as if to himself, ‘Wilt thou break a leaf driven to and fro? Wilt thou pursue the dry stubble?’ Hugh Ritson overheard the words, and all his manner changed. The stubborn lips softened, the sombre eye melted, the contracted brow relaxed, and, for the first time in all this length of years, he cried like a little child.

At the same instant the sun swept up, and he fell. Parson Christian bent over him. The crimson of the east was reflected on his white face. The new day had dawned.

On the Tuesday following two mourners stood by an open grave in the churchyard of Newlands. One of them was whiteheaded; the other wore the jacket and cap, the badge

and broad arrow of a convict. The sexton and his man had lowered the coffin to its last home, and then stepped aside. A tall man leaned on the lych gate, and a group of men and women stood in silence by the porch to the church. The afternoon sun was low, and the shadows of the tombstones stretched far on the grass.

The convict went down on his knees, and looked long into the grave. When he arose the company that had gathered about the porch had gone, and voices singing a hymn came from within the old church. It was the village choir practising. The world's work had begun again.

CHAPTER XVIII.

Two days later the fell behind the Ghyll was a scene of unusual animation. It was the day of the shearing. The sheep, visibly whiter and more fleecy for a washing of some days before, had been gathered into stone folds. Clippers were seated on creels ranged about a turf fire, over which a pot of tar hung from a triangle of boughs. Boy ‘catchers’ brought up the sheep, one by one, and girl ‘helpers’ carried away the fleeces, hot and odorous, and hung them over the open barn doors. As the sheep were stripped, they were tugged to the fire and branded from the bubbling tar with the smet mark of the Ritsons. The metallic click of the shears was in the air, and over all was the blue sky and the brilliant sunshine.

In a white overall, stained with patches of tar and some streaks of blood, smudged with soap and scraps of the clinging wool, Parson Christian moved among the shearers, applying plentiful doses of salve from a huge can to the snips made in the skin of the sheep by the accidents of the shears.

‘We might have waited for the maister afore shearing—eh?’ said Reuben, from one of the creels.

‘He’ll be here before we finish, please the Lord,’ answered the parson.

‘Is it to-day you’re to gang for him?’

‘Yes, this afternoon.’

‘A daub on this leg, parson, where she kicked—deuce take her. . . . It’s like you’ll bring him home in a car?’

‘Aye, Randal Alston has loaned me his mare.’

‘Why, man, what a upshot we’ll have for sure—bacon pie and veal and haggish and top stannin pie and puddings, I reckon. . . . Just a hand to her leg, parson, while I strip the coat and waistcoat off this black-

faced herwick. . . . Is the mistress to come home too ?'

' Nay, Reuben. Mrs. Ritson has gone back where she came from.'

' Weel, it's no'but naturable after all that's happent. . . . Easy now . . . be quiet, wilta . . . dusta want another snip, eh ? . . . And young Mistress Greta—it's like *she'll* be mistress now ?'

' It's very likely she'll come to the Ghyll with her husband, Reuben.'

' God bless her ! And there's been no luck on the land since *he* left it—and everything a fault too. . . . There, she's stripped. Away with her Natt, man, and de'il tak' her.'

In the afternoon a vast crowd of men, women and children had gathered once more about the old town hall at Keswick. They laughed and bantered and sang. Presently, the door of the hall was thrown open and two men came out. One was Paul Ritson, no longer clad as a convict; the other was Parson Christian. The people hailed them with a mighty shout,

lifted them into a gig that was drawn up in the market-place, took out the horses and crowded into the shafts. Then they set off with a great cheer through the town and the country road, the dust rising in clouds behind them.

They took the road to the west of the valley, and as they passed under the wood an old man, much bent, was easing a smoking fire in the charcoal pit. He paused and raised himself, his iron rod in his hand, and lifted his heavy eyes towards the clamorous company. The gig flew past with its shouts, its cheers, and its noisy laughter, and the old man turned silently back to his work.

When they came near to the Vicarage Paul leapt from the carriage over the heads of the men who pulled it, vaulted the gate, and bounded into the house. There was one who waited for him there, and in an instant she was locked close in his arms. ‘At last!’ he whispered. Her heart overflowed; she dropped her fair young head on his heaving breast, and wept sweet tears.

Parson Christian came rolling up the path surrounded by a tumultuous throng. Foremost and lustiest were the blacksmith and the miller, and close behind came the landlord and the postman. All were shouting as if their brassy throats might crack.

There was high revel at the Ghyll that evening. First came the feasting in the old kitchen : huge rounds of beef, quarters of lambs, peas and sweet puddings and pies. Then came the dancing in the barn, lighted by candles in cloven sticks, and lanterns of turnips that were scooped out hollow.

But at the Vicarage Paul and Greta sat alone in silence and with clasped hands. Parson Christian came in and out at intervals, gossiping cheerily of the odds and ends of daily life, as if its even tenour had never been disturbed. They supped together, and sat on till midnight ; and then the old Christian took down his green tome and wrote :

‘ June 30.—So Paul being to return home after his long absence, I spent the

forenoon on the fell shearing, and earned a stone of wool and a windle of rye. In the afternoon I set forward towards Keswick, wherefor Randal Alston had loaned me his mare and gig. At the Flying Horse I lit not, but stood while I drank a pot of ale with John Proudfoot and Richard Parkinson and a neighbour that comes to-morrow to thatch the low barn for me. Then direct to Keswick, where there was a great concourse, and a hearty welcome and much rejoicings that warmed me and came nigh to break me withal. Got son Paul at last, and would have driven direct home, but the good folk were not minded that it should be so, and nought would do but that they must loose the mare and run in the shafts. So we reached home about six and found all well, and my love Greta after long waiting in her closet very busy with Paul, who had run in ahead of me. So I went out again and foddered and watered the mare, for Peter is sometimes a sad fatch and will not always give a horse what is worth its trouble in

the eating. And being throng this evening a-mending the heels of my old clock boots with lath nails, whereof I bought a penny-worth at Thomas Seed's shop in the market-place, I saw little of Paul, but left him to Greta. Then supped, and read a psalm and prayed in my family, and set till full midnight. So I retire to my lodging-room at peace with all the world, and commend my all to God. The Lord forgive the sins of me and mine that we have committed in these our days of trial. Blessed be God who has wrought our victory, and overcome our enemies and brought us out more than conquerors. Amen.'

Parson Christian had put down the pen and was sprinkling the writing with sand from a pepper-castor, when Brother Peter came in with candles in his hand and a letter under his abridged arm. 'Laal Tom o' Dint gave me this for thee,' he said to Paul, and dropped the letter on to his knees. 'I was sa thrang with all their bodderments, that I don't know as I didna forget it.'

Parson Christian returned the green-clad book to its shelf, took up his candle, bade good-night and went to bed.

Brother Peter shambled out, and then Paul and Greta were left alone.

Paul opened the letter. It was enclosed in a sheet of paper that bore the stamp of the Convent of St. Margaret, and these words only, ‘Sent on by Sister Grace.’ Paul began to read the letter aloud, Greta looking over his shoulder. But as he proceeded, his voice faltered, and he stopped. Then in silence the eyes of both traversed the written words. They ran :

‘Mother, I have wronged you deeply, and yours is a wrong that may never be repaired. The past does not return, and what is done is done with. It is not allowed to us to raze out the sins and the sufferings of the days that are gone; they stand and will endure. I am not so bad a man as perhaps I seem; but of what avail is it to defend myself now? and who would believe me? My life has been one long

error, and the threads of my fate have been tangled. Have I not passed before our little world for a stern and callous man? Yet the blight of my soul has been passion. Yearning for love where love could never be returned, I am the ruins of what I might have been. If I did wrong knowingly, it was not until passion mastered me; if I saw things as they did not exist, it was because passion made me blind. Mother, if there is One above to watch and judge our little lives, surely He sees this, and reckons the circumstance with the deed.

‘Tell *her* that I wish her peace. If I were a man used to pray, perhaps I would ask Heaven to bless her. But my heart is barren of prayer. And what, after all, boots *my* praying? I have given her back at last to the love of a noble man. And now my wasted life is done. And this is the end—a sorry end !

‘Mother, I shall not live to suffer the earthly punishment of my crime. Never fear—my hand shall not be lifted against myself. Be sure of that, whatever else may

seem doubtful. But very soon this passionate and rebellious soul will stand for judgment before its awaiting God.

‘Farewell, my mother, farewell——’

THE END

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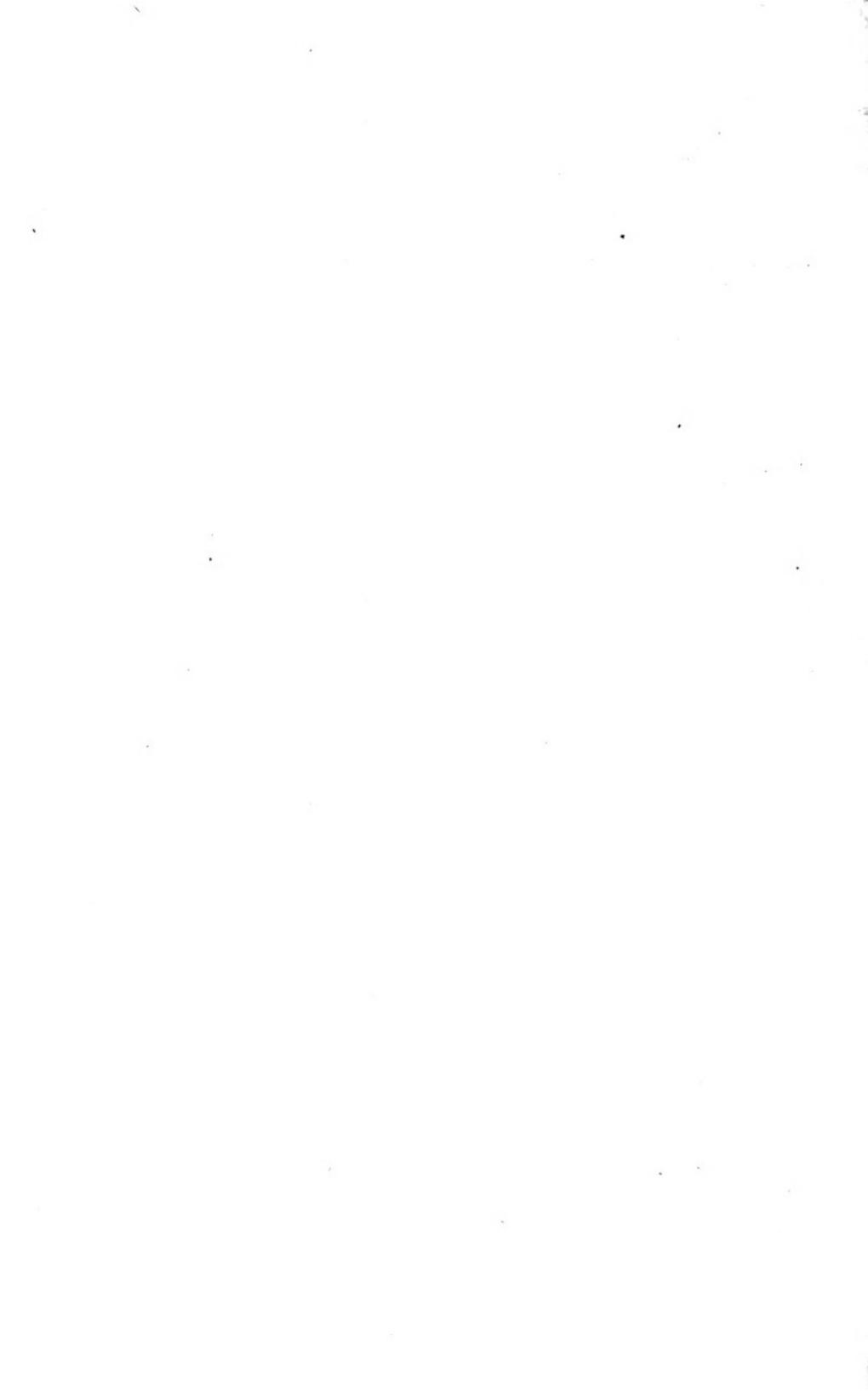
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